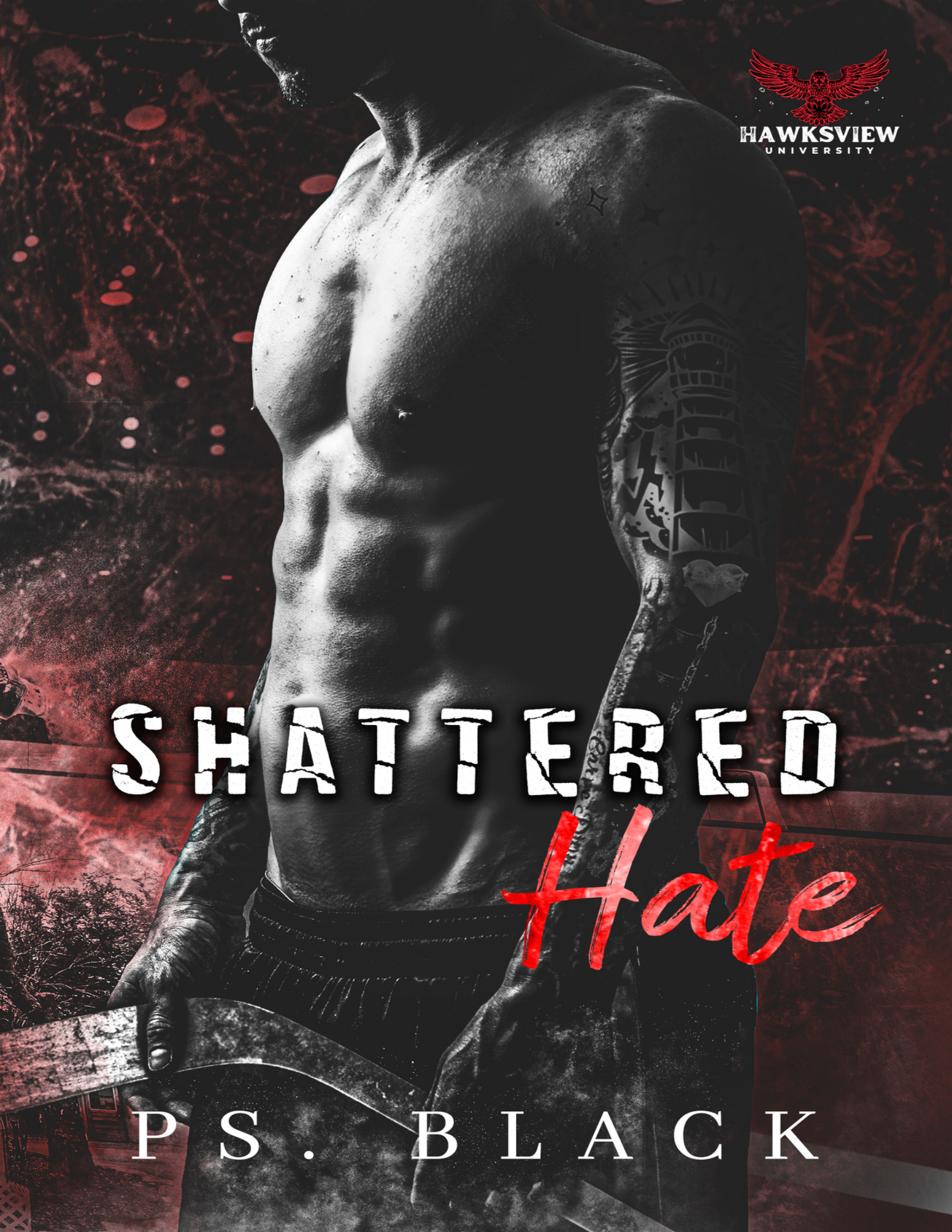
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Playlist

None of my books would be written without a playlist.
Each song on my playlists are inspo's for my book!
Shattered Hate playlist

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Foreword

Shattered Hate includes themes that some readers may find difficult to read. It also contains mature content. For a list of potential triggers, please click the link below. ***This will have spoilers.***

Shattered Hate Trigger list

"Nobody tells you that first love cuts the deepest."
-Trayton King

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Series

Hawksview University Series is written as an interconnected character series. To understand Trayton and Daxton's story, **you must read *Shattered Ice* first.**

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Dedication

To those who feel like everyone will leave them: I promise, someone's out there waiting to stay.

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Prologue

Trayton – Four years ago

Girls. Girls. Girls.

By the time I reached the age of ten, it was all about girls. If you didn't want to ask a girl out, it was weird. If you didn't comment on how pretty a girl was, it was weird.

I hated it because I didn't look at girls like that. I wanted to, but I didn't get what was so amazing about them.

What I did like was the idea of love. From a very young age, I always craved to know what true love felt like, especially after my mom left me a note saying goodbye and telling me one day I would understand.

"One day, when you fall in love, Trayton, you will understand why I've had to leave."

All she ever did was watch movies with lots of kissing and read books that made her smile more than I or Dad ever could. I asked her once what love felt like because I didn't think I had ever experienced it. I remember her looking sadly at me and saying, "The movies and books say you'll know it's love when your heart aches just to be near that person. The nausea when you're apart consumes your body and mind. Butterflies flutter in your ribcage, and one glance at that person releases them, swarming your body and leaving you floating and happy. It's an exhilarating rush, like a rollercoaster ride, where fear and excitement blend into pure joy. But it's

also the quiet moments of peace, where simply being in their presence and sharing the silence speaks louder than words ever could."

I wanted to feel that. And I think my mom did too. I think that's why she left me. I think she wanted to go find that love. My dad's love was his work; it was never my mom. And my love? I don't think it was enough for her.

I wanted to know what was so good about love that she left me for it. So in elementary school, I had a girlfriend, Natalie. Every guy in my class liked Natalie. They would leave her notes on her chair, and their eyes would follow her on the playground. But I didn't feel how I thought I should have felt. For a while, I thought I was broken; I thought something was wrong with me. Because I hated every single minute of being with Natalie.

I hated the feel of her soft skin when she'd try to hold my hand on the playground. I hated her dull eyes that would capture me anytime I was near her. Where was this sparkle they talked about in Mom's movies? I felt nothing when I looked at her.

On my eleventh birthday, I went to the lighthouse near home, my refuge from the chaos of my mind. I went there to escape, to find solitude like I always did when my head got too loud. But on that day, I wasn't alone. I met a boy there. He smiled at me and said, "Hi." I asked him why he was there, and he just shrugged, his cheeks turning a deep shade of red before he dropped his head. He didn't say much, but just sitting with him was enough. In that moment, with his shy smile and the way he made me feel seen, I realized I liked him a lot more than Natalie. I went to that lighthouse every day for two months straight. He was there again and again. There was a strange, exhilarating excitement whenever I saw him.

I was eleven years old when I realized I wasn't broken.

I just didn't like girls. I liked boys. I liked *this* boy. But why? He always sat there with his hood up. He barely spoke to me. He never told me his name, even when I told him mine. But he was peace. He was calming when I needed it. His smile stood out against the darkness of his hoodie that framed his face, and although I could barely see his eyes, I used to catch the redness creeping up his cheeks when he smiled.

He just smiled at me and went red a lot. But god, that smile—it did things to me. It was like a light piercing through the shadows, making my heart race and my palms sweat. I liked it. I think I went red quite a lot too.

I stare down at my lucky coin, flipping it between my fingers, remembering the day he gave it to me.

“What is this?” I frown down at the thin silver coin that’s engraved.

“Call it a lucky coin,” he mumbled.

I squint my eyes and read what it says. "Fuck Yes." I laugh, placing my hand over my mouth because I swore.

“Turn it over.” He smiled.

I turn it over and read "Fuck No." I frown up at him. “What does it mean?” I’m confused about why he gave it to me.

He shrugged. “Whatever you want it to mean.” And with that, he stood up and left.

I ran down the stairs of the lighthouse and kissed him on the cheek to say thank you. My lips tingled all night.

I went back the following day. He wasn’t there.

Or the day after that.

Every day for a month, I went back.

I cried that night. I didn’t even cry when my mom left.

The words they used to describe love—I had that. I was eleven years old when I felt all of it. Then, I didn’t know what it meant, but it sure felt like what Mom described.

It sucked.

Nobody warns you that first love can change you forever.

Nobody tells you how hard it is to breathe when that first heartbreak hits.

And nobody tells you that first love cuts the deepest.

I never saw him again. I never got that feeling again.

Until I saw *him*.

His eyes sparkled like shooting stars against the night sky. His smile was a beam of light in my otherwise dull life.

For the *second* time in my short eleven years of life, I felt them—the butterflies, the rush, the excitement, and even the peacefulness he created that surrounded me whenever he was close by. At that moment, I felt everything.

It was the first time I didn’t think about the boy from the lighthouse.

Over the years, my happiest moments were spent with him, sharing peanut butter cups. We always got a pack of three, and he’d split the last one so we could share. When his hand accidentally brushed mine, I felt it—

an electric zap straight to my chest. Thousands of currents shot through me, making my heart race and flutter.

For four years, I thought I was in love with my best friend. I stood by his side, hoping he'd feel the same one day.

And he did.

When we were fifteen, we shared our first kiss. I've never felt anything like it.

He would watch me for hours while I trained on the ice, and his face lit up like the night sky on the Fourth of July whenever our eyes connected.

But then things changed—he changed.

I've learned that movies and books deceive us. They don't tell you about the other side of love—the side that feels like thousands of knives piercing every butterfly that once swarmed your body.

Nobody tells you about the feeling of having your heart stamped on and shattered.

Nobody tells you how much it fucking hurts.

Here I am, sixteen years old, staring at the *third* person to leave me, the *third* person to break my heart.

I stare at the boy, who just shattered my soul into tiny fragments, while he kisses another guy.

The boy I have loved for the last five years.

The boy I gave myself to on my sixteenth birthday.

The boy who was my best friend.

Today will always be the day I remember that I, Trayton King, switched his feelings off and vowed never to fall in love again.

Fuck Bexley Anders.

Fuck love.

And, to the guy who is currently staring straight at me while kissing the boy I love…

FUCK YOU, Daxton Rivers.

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Chapter One

Trayton

Present Day – Twenty years old

"Did you see the pictures Brayden put up on his Insta?" Kal mutters while we run side by side on the treadmill. I smile to myself, remembering last night when I looked at Brayden's Insta and saw all the things he and Mr. Stiles, or I guess I call him Bohdi now, were doing. It looks like they had a pretty good damn time.

"Yeah, kinda jealous," I huff out as I turn the incline down. Kal and I have been going hard at it in the gym since the win of the Frozen Four two weeks ago. Coach said to give ourselves a rest and bask in the celebrations, but that's not us. We want more; we're always hungry for more. Don't get me wrong, I drank more alcohol in one night when we won than I would in a month, but after that, we were back at it, training hard.

Kal, Bray, and I all have AHL and even NHL scouts interested in us. That truly blows my fucking mind anytime I think about it. One of them has already spoken to Coach about me, and if that doesn't push me to train harder, then I don't know what will. No one has been immediately signed, but they want to keep coming to the games and watching us when the new season starts. So all Kal and I have thought about is winning the Frozen Four again and proving it wasn't a fluke, not that our skills don't show exactly how good we are.

Something in the last week has been plaguing my mind. What if we get scouted for different states? I don't know if I can leave my boys. They're

my family. Especially after what happened last year. I don't know if I can leave Bray. He has Bohdi, but it's not the same. Kal and I are his brothers. He needs us more than ever now. Slowing the speed down, I come to a stop while Kal huffs out a laugh.

"Slacking already?" Kal taunts, increasing the speed on the treadmill to make his point. He knows how competitive I am, and usually, his taunting works, but today, I've got places to be.

"I'll meet you back here tomorrow and show you just how long I can run, but I've gotta go."

"Where you going?" he asks, slowing the treadmill down and hopping off before it even stops.

"Got an appointment at the tattoo place to talk about that sleeve I want." He nods knowingly. Since I was sixteen, I've talked about getting this tattoo, but I never quite had the guts to do it. Now feels like the right time.

"Cool," he says with a nod. "I'll see you back at the dorm." Slapping Kal on the back, I bend down and grab my bag and towel before heading for a quick shower.

As I draw closer to the tattoo shop, excitement courses through me like an electric current. For four long years, I've carefully envisioned every intricate detail of this tattoo. I wish I had the talent to draw it myself, but since I don't, I'm placing my hopes in the hands of an artist who's been highly recommended. I've jotted down every single detail, but my excitement often gets the better of me, causing me to forget half of what I want to say, and I end up spewing nonsense. I might just walk out with a pig holding a puck between its teeth. And I'm pretty sure no one would even be surprised.

Standing outside the tattoo parlor, I look up at the sign, my heart pounding with anticipation. I can't believe the moment has finally arrived. I push open the door, and the familiar buzz of tattoo guns instantly hits me from the rooms beyond the counter. My eyes dart around the room, taking in every detail. A funky red leather couch sits to the left, a vivid splash of

color against the dark, brooding black walls. Graffiti-style art is spray-painted in various places, but it's the massive image on the wall directly in front of me that stops me in my tracks.

It's a lake with crystal-clear water, reflecting the vibrant greens and browns of the surrounding trees. The trees stand tall. Between the trees, a warm, gentle glow peeks through, casting what looks like a magical golden light over the scene. The glow could be from a rising or setting sun. I squint at it because I'm almost certain it looks familiar. Is it the sun, or is it a reflection on the water? My eyes move over it, and I can't help but feel trapped by how simply beautiful it is. It's like a moment frozen in time. It's peaceful. And then there's a quote underneath it. *"Love is a paradox of life and death, keeping you alive to endure every shard of pain."* Something about those words strikes a chord inside me, and I can't really understand what I feel when I read them.

"It's a beautiful piece of art, isn't it?" A deep voice interrupts my thoughts as I read the quote over and over.

"It's fucking amazing," I say, still caught in the art's trance.

"The new kid done it. He's pretty fucking talented." I reluctantly drag my eyes away from the art and meet those of a tall, skinny guy, hair tied back in a bun on the top of his head. Tattoos cover what is visible of his body. He even has some on his face. "What can I do for you, then?"

"I have an appointment. Name's Trayton King."

"Ahh, yes. You're booked in with Dom," he says before reaching for a clipboard and placing it down in front of me.

"I need you to fill out this questionnaire and sign a few forms." He gives me a pen, which I take from him. "Dom is just finishing up with his client, and then he'll be ready to go through your design." I nod absently, my eyes immediately going to the art on the wall again—the words. I sit down on the bright-red couch, forgetting about the paperwork that rests on my lap as my eyes move to the painting again. There's a gold plaque above it with the engraving "Mystic Tealglow."

"Is that the name of the painting?" I say to the guy behind the counter as I point to the plaque.

"Yep." He pops the *p* and smiles as he becomes entranced with the painting once more. I turn my eyes, taking it in again. The name's perfect.

"I want the new kid," I say before I can even stop myself.

"What?"

“I-I,” I slowly move my eyes from the words. “I’m sorry. I know I asked for Dom when I first called, but the new kid…” I nod my head toward the art.

“He’s not here until next weekend.”

“That’s fine.” I nod, standing up and placing the clipboard back on the counter.

“Still complete that. I’ll give him all the details you gave Dom and call you with an appointment.”

I nod, taking back the clipboard and pen.

Once completed, I hand them back to him, and at that moment, a guy walks out of a room behind the counter.

“Dom, your appointment is canceled.”

“Cool.” He nods, his eyes sweeping me before going back to the guy behind the counter, who I don’t think ever told me his name.

“Yeah, sorry,” I say. “The new kid, he’s…” I pause, trying to find my words as my eyes look up to that piece of art that I think will forever be ingrained in my mind, and I can’t really decipher why. “He’s it,” I simply say. Dom raises his hands in surrender.

“None taken, dude. You’ll be his first booking. I’m sure he’ll be stoked.”

I aimlessly nod and grab my bag. “Speak to you soon?” I say to the guy behind the counter. He nods.

“As soon as I know what dates he can do, I’ll call you, and you can come in. He’ll want to go over some designs with you first, so don’t expect to have this done quickly.” A part of me is gutted. I really thought today was going to be the start of it, and once I get something in my head, it’s like an itch I can’t get rid of until I do it. I take one last look at the art on the wall and take a deep breath. It has to be him who does it. I can’t pinpoint why, but it just has to be.

Bounding through my dorm door, I slump on my bed, huffing. I know it was my decision to wait, but now my mind is on overdrive, wishing I could find the kid so I could at least offer him double the amount to start on my

design now. I stand up, pacing up and down beside my bed, scowling at the floor like it personally insulted me.

“Trayton.” Kal’s deep voice makes me jump as I spin on the balls of my feet and see him lying on top of his covers. He has one arm bent behind his head, with his phone in his hand, balancing it on his chest. One of his eyebrows is raised at me, obviously wondering why I’m pacing. As usual, I was so in my own head that I didn’t even notice Kal lying there.

“I’m back to square one with my tattoo.” I huff, slumping down on my bed again, this time throwing my hands up, feeling fed up.

“What did you do?” Kal stretches as he sits up and throws his phone beside him on the bed, resting his elbows on his knees, eyes pinned on me.

“Hey.” I frown. “I didn’t do anything.” I stand again and begin to pace. It helps when my mind races. It’s as if when I move my body, my body races with it.

“Well, I did, but nothing bad.” I stop and turn to Kal. “I don’t think.” I move my eyes to the wall behind him and stare at it, thinking for a moment, and shake my head. “No, nothing bad,” I confirm.

“Then what’s wrong, Tray.” Kal huffs.

“I canceled my booking.”

“Why?” He rears his head back, confusion marring his face instantly.

“Well, I went in there, and Kal, man, you should have seen this piece of art on the wall. I’ve honestly never seen anything like—”

“Trayton,” Kal grumbles. “You didn’t get sidetracked by a different piece of art, did you? I know what you’re like.”

“No, hear me out.” I stop pacing and face him, coming close and dropping to my knees in front of him. “It was beautiful, Kal. Like, so beautiful. I don’t think I will ever forget it.” My shoulders drop as I take a deep breath, images of the art floating through my mind and somehow calming the chaos inside. “The whole piece told a story, a real fucking story. And the words…” I trail off as goose bumps litter my skin. I shake my head, bringing myself back as I stare up at Kal. He stares down at me, looking somewhat intrigued but also concerned. The brother I never had. Well, I have a brother, same dad, different mom. We’re not close. But Kal has always been the one constantly protecting me and ensuring I make the right decisions. Honestly, I think if it wasn’t for him and Bray, I would have lost my head completely by now and probably have my eyelids pierced or

something. If that's something you can get done. I make a mental note to search that up later. That's got to be some mad shit, surely?

"Come back into the room, Tray." Kal slaps my face lightly.

"Shit, yeah, sorry." I laugh. "So, I canceled with Dom. He was the guy I was going to get the tattoo from, and I booked in with the new guy who's just started, and who created the art on the wall. I'll be his first booking." I grin.

"So, let me get this right." Kal leans forward, keeping his eyes on me the whole time. "You booked in with someone whose art you have seen once and who hasn't tattooed before. Is that correct?"

"Yes." I grin wider.

"Jesus Christ," Kal mumbles. "Just because he has one good piece of art, Tray, that doesn't mean everything will be good. Did you not think to look at a portfolio? I'm sure they would have had one of his drawings and stuff." Kal rubs a hand down his face like he's over me, which he does most days, but the guy will never be over me. I add more excitement to Kal's life than he probably wants. Let's be real. I'm basically a nineties girl band on steroids.

So add some spice to your life and get ready to have your mind blown, Kal.

"Calm down, Dad. He's it. I'm telling you. Just you wait. This whole fucking college will be jealous as fuck when they see my sleeve—you included—mark my words, Kal.

He's. The. One."

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Chapter Two

Daxton

For the first time in years, I finally feel the chains loosening around my neck. I stare at the letter the dean handed me. I have a dorm. I don't have to stay in this prison anymore. I let out a deep breath, feeling a mix of relief and excitement as a weight lifts off my shoulders.

I take one last look around the dingy room, the stained walls, with the smell of stale smoke and despair. This place has been my prison, a drug den where hope came to die. But now, with this letter in hand, I can leave it all behind. The thought of a clean, safe dorm room feels like a dream come true.

My dad doesn't know yet, and I can't bring myself to tell him. I cling to the false hope that once I'm in the dorm, he won't be able to do anything about it. Not in his state.

Marley might still cause trouble, but I'll deal with that when the time comes.

I can't live this life anymore. I refuse to be the kid from a drug-dealing, addiction-ridden family. The kid trapped by his pathetic dad. The kid who gets beaten for his dad's entertainment. The kid exploited daily to sell drugs and make money, seeing hardly a penny. I knew I needed to get out.

We both did.

Bex and me.

The guilt that engulfs me every day rears its ugly head as I think about Bex. Bex, who had his whole life ahead of him. Bex, who deserved the chance I'm getting right now. He will never get any of that, and it's my family's fault.

It's my fault.

I shake my head, trying my best to release the thoughts from it, even if it's only for a moment. They'll come back later when I'm lying in the dark.

They always do.

I know Bex would want me to get out of this. He didn't want this life for me; he told me that so many times. He told me that when he left, he was taking me with him. I always thought we were getting out of this together.

I glance up at the wall, a drawing I drew for Bex, which he stuck up above my headboard. A drawing of London, all the tall buildings, the big Ferris wheel. The water. He told me he was taking me and Brayden there one day.

Now Brayden is there, seeing it all without him.

Life is so unfair. I really fucking hate it sometimes.

I harshly swallow, trying to keep the emotions at bay. I allow myself two more seconds to stare at the picture before quickly storming over and taking it off the wall. I was going to leave it; I knew if I didn't, I would stare at it every day, beating myself up, knowing Bexley would never get to go there, but we made a promise to each other. We would get out of this life together. He may have left physically, but he still lingers on. He's still here with me in some way.

"Let's go, Bexley," I whisper before closing the door on a room I hope I never have to see again.

"Okay, Daxton. These are all your papers. This is your dorm key and number. I think that is it." The dean smiles tightly at me before slightly dropping his head to look at me. He seems a bit too serious over the rim of his glasses perched on his nose. "You missed a lot of classes last year. I need you to work extra hard this year, Daxton," his voice says softly but

with a slight edge to it. I know after everything that happened with Bexley, and then Brayden and Mr. Stiles, that the dean discovered a lot of stuff. He found out about my home life, and I truly think this is why they have offered me a dorm and a scholarship.

Last year, Marley paid for my education. Well, with all the selling I did and barely seeing a penny, I technically paid, but in Marley's eyes, he paid. He never let me forget that.

This year, I was given the education and dorm, but it means I have to work extra hard, and I will.

"You missed out on quite a bit in your major last year, Daxton, so your final paper this year is going to be complex. I've spoken to Mr. Jenkins, and he has helped pull this together. We believe you can do something magical with what we've put together." The dean clears his throat. "All the details are in the envelope. I suspect you may have some questions, so please do stop by to see me or Mr. Jenkins if needed."

I nod. "Anything. Whatever I can do to bring my grade up, I'll do it." The way the dean eyes me makes me kind of wish I didn't say that.

"Then you won't have any problems with your final then." He smiles tightly before nodding his head to his door to dismiss me.

Once I close the dean's office door, I let my eyes drift down the hallway. The doors are all glass, and digital nameplates display the professors' names and departments. Cool art pieces decorate the walls, and interactive screens showcase student projects and event info.

The floors are polished concrete, reflecting the bright LED lights in the ceiling. There's a soft hum from the electronics and quiet chatter in the air. Sunlight streams through the big floor-to-ceiling windows, lighting up the space and giving a great view of the busy campus outside. I never really took in before how amazing this college is and how lucky I am right now. I can't stop the grin that appears on my face. I make quick work of heading across campus toward the dorms, excitement increasing with each step I take. As the building comes into view, I can't help but laugh a little to myself, trying to keep my head aimed low when I do so people don't think I'm weird. Well, they already do, but weirder than I already am. Picking up the pace, I make it to the door when a guy holds it open for me, and when I enter, there are doors upon doors and stairs leading up to more doors. I look at the sign and see that my dorm is on the third floor. I take the stairs two at a time. I know I'll be sharing, and I just have to hope it will be with

someone who has no idea who I am. Or someone who does and is willing to ignore me so I can work on what's necessary to get through the rest of the semester. Scanning each door as I pass, I look for my number, and when I land on 314, I take a deep breath, bracing myself for whatever's on the other side. Opening the door slowly, I peer in, and my first thought is, thank God—whoever lives in this room isn't messy. There isn't one thing out of place or any clothes lying around. One thing I can't deal with is a mess. I haven't been able to be in control of much in my life, but having a tidy room was the one thing I was in control of. I take a few tentative steps, scanning the room, two beds on opposite sides of each other, bedside tables with a wardrobe in the middle of them. I glance to the left and see a tall cabinet with a decent-size TV sitting on top. A few posters of some half-naked women litter one side of the room, and then I freeze when my eyes land on trophies. Not just any trophies—hockey trophies.

Fuck.

A clean person and someone who didn't play sports. That's all I wanted. It wasn't too much to ask, but apparently, it was.

Groaning, I drag myself and my bags inside, flopping on the bed that doesn't have naked women surrounding it. I eye up the trophies, wondering if there's a name on them. Do I want the surprise, or do I need to prepare? There's one person who I would rather shit in my own hand and clap than share a room with, and that's Trayton King. As long as it's not him, I can do this.

I stand up, taking steps toward the trophies like something is about to jump out at me. When I reach them, I bend down to get a closer look at the plaques. The first few I scan all say Devil Hawks, which is the name of Hawksview's hockey team, but then my eyes snag on one with a name.

"Er, can I help you?" A deep voice from behind me causes me to go rigid. Fuck.

Turning around, my eyes land on my new roommate.

"Hi, Cope." I smile, well, I try, but I think it comes out as more of a grimace. Cope doesn't say anything. He just stares at me, blinking. He probably hasn't been told. "I'm your new roommate," I mumble. Cope blinks a few more times before nodding slowly and then turning around to look at my bed, seeing my two small garbage bags, which literally hold my world in.

“Why have you brought two trash bags in with you?” He scrunches his nose, still not moving from the spot he’s standing in, and he still hasn’t closed the door to the dorm, like he thinks he’ll need an escape route.

“That’s my clothes,” I deadpan.

“Oh,” he says, his mouth forming a small *o* shape and staying like that for a few seconds before he scratches the back of his head in an awkward move. I point behind me to the trophies.

“I didn’t know who I was sharing with, so I was just finding out.”

“Cool,” he says, nodding again and walking toward his bed. The whole ordeal was just as awkward as I instantly imagined as soon as I saw Cope Jackson’s name. It then dawns on me as I stare at my new bed.

This was Brayden’s room. He shared with Cope.

But now he lives with Mr. Stiles.

Move out one trailer park kid and move another in. Good ole Hawksview U.

Cope rustles around with something on his bed and then turns, heading straight for the door, leaving and shutting it lightly behind him.

Cope knows who I am. But he’s never been hostile toward me. He’s always left me alone, so I’m hoping it stays that way. I only ever existed in one person’s world, and he’s gone now, so it’s just me, and that’s the way I like it. Hopefully, he treats me like I don’t exist just as everyone else has. Sighing, I begin emptying the *trash* bags and open some drawers near my bed, thankfully finding them empty. I fold up the few clothes I have, all black, of course, and place them in the drawers.

Within ten minutes, the bags are empty, and everything is put away. I hold the picture I drew for Bex in my hand, staring down at it, and debate whether I should fold it up and put it away. But then I think twice and stand on my mattress, fixing the picture to the wall above my headboard.

“Look over me, Bex.” I smile.

I flop down on the bed, instantly realizing how comfy this mattress is. A lot more comfortable than my bed back in the trailer. I stare at the envelope the dean gave me. Eagerly, I grab it, wondering what he and Mr. Jenkins have put together. What they think I will be so good at doing.

God, I hope it’s street art. That’s my favorite, and Mr. Jenkins has already said it’s my specialty. “You’re fantastic at putting a story and so much emotion into one image, Daxton,” he once said. I already have so many ideas that I could create, and my fingers tremble from excitement as I pull

the papers out of the envelope. I scan the first few paragraphs, which detail the grades I could get, and then my eyes move down.

No.

No.

FUCK NO.

Rising quickly, I snatch the keys from the bed and storm toward the door, slamming it shut with a resounding echo. I refuse to do this, and I'm about to confront the dean, insisting on any alternative, anything but this.

Bursting through the mass of students and hurtling down the stairs of the dorm building, I shove the doors open, gulping in the air that my desperate lungs crave with each frantic breath. My gaze drops as I clutch the paper once more, scanning the words in disbelief, praying this is some cruel illusion.

But it isn't.

The words stare back at me in stark black ink.

This year's final paper will focus on: "The Art of Ice Hockey."

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Chapter Three

Trayton

"There's my baby." I grin, sprinting toward Brayden. It feels like an eternity since I've seen him, though it's only been a little over two weeks. Brayden's face ignites the entire locker room as he smiles, and I barrel into him, sending us both crashing into the lockers. "Never leave me that long again," I say with fake tears. "I was nothing without you." I hear Brayden laugh.

"Stop hogging." Kal's deep voice comes from behind, shoving me off Brayden and pulling him into a fierce bro hug that somehow swallows Brayden's six-foot-three frame. Kal is only a couple of inches taller than Bray, but he's got a good fifty pounds on both of us. Fifty pounds of pure muscle. Both of them slap each other's backs. As Kal steps back, I finally get a good look at Bray, and that gnawing ache in my stomach eases. I'd had that gut feeling like something was off, but I couldn't pinpoint what. It turns out, it was Brayden.

I was terrified he wouldn't be okay. I've seen Brayden and Kal nearly every day since we were eleven. Since we met on the ice, when I noticed how off Brayden's form was from a mile away.

I didn't hold back; I went right over and told him where he was going wrong. And I remember that day, seeing something in his eyes that made me want to help him—not just with his form, but with everything.

As the locker room buzzes with the usual pre-training energy, Brayden's face relaxes into a genuine smile. He pulls out his phone and shows us a picture of him and Bohdi from their London trip, both of their eyes sparkling with happiness. "Yo, London was incredible! We went to all these cool places, and—oh, I got you both something," he says, digging into his bag.

Kal and I exchange curious glances as Brayden hands us each a small, neatly wrapped package. I tear mine open to find a keychain with a miniature Big Ben. Kal's got the iconic red London bus. "Thought you'd like a piece of London with you." Brayden grins.

"Thanks, man," Kal says, his usual stern expression softening for a moment. "But don't think this makes up for ditching us for a whole two weeks."

"Yeah, you've got a lot to make up for on the ice," I add, smirking.

Brayden laughs, putting away his phone and slipping into his gear. "Better get ready then. I've got a lot of energy to burn." He winks.

"Is Bohdi's stamina not what you thought, no?" I tease.

Brayden throws his head back, laughing, before flipping me off.

As we suit up, Coach walks in, clapping his hands to get everyone's attention. "All right, team! We've got a lot of ground to cover today, so let's make it count. Brayden, welcome back. Hope you didn't lose your edge in London."

"No way, Coach," Brayden replies, determination etched on his face. There's still a slight awkwardness between Coach and Brayden since everything that happened last year. I guess Coach finding out his best friend from when they were kids was fucking his nineteen-year-old star player didn't go down well, and Coach still hasn't let it go. It's a shame because the connection and love between Bohdi and Brayden is clear to see. And that's coming from someone who doesn't believe in love.

As the team hits the ice, the familiar sound of skates cutting through the rink fills the air. Brayden takes a quick lap around, testing his legs after the two weeks off. Kal and I exchange a glance. I've missed this fucker.

"Hey, Bray, you sure you didn't gain a few pounds of fat on that London trip?" I call out, my voice echoing through the rink.

Brayden laughs, shaking his head. "Only in your dreams, Tray. You're just jealous I got to eat proper fish and chips."

Kal chimes in, smirking. “Watch it, Trayton. Bray’s got that post-vacation energy. You’re in for a workout.”

“Bring it on,” I reply, grinning as I pick up speed. “I’m not the one who spent a week sipping tea.”

Brayden skates over and nudges me. “You’d love it there, Tray. All the posh accents and fancy buildings. Maybe you’d finally learn some manners.”

“Oh, I’ve got manners,” I retort. “I’m just saving them for when it really matters—like beating your ass in practice.”

The banter continues as we weave through drills, our competitive spirits pushing each other harder. Coach Denny keeps a watchful eye, occasionally yelling out pointers but mostly letting us drive each other.

At one point, Brayden and I race to the puck, our skates throwing up ice shavings as we battle for control. He manages to hook it away, flashing a triumphant grin.

“Still got it,” he boasts.

“For now,” I shoot back, panting slightly. “Just wait till the next drill.”

Kal skates over, joining. “Hope London didn’t make you soft, Bray. We’ve got games to win.”

“The Quake is back, boys, just you wait and see,” Brayden says, his eyes full of determination.

The rest of practice flies by in a blur of speed, laughter, and terrorizing each other. The bond between us growing stronger with every pass, every shot, every moment on the ice.

“Yo.” Cope strides over to me, Kal, and Bray once we’re back in the locker room, his expression a mix of excitement and unease. “Good to have you back.” Cope pulls Bray into a tight hug.

“Good to be back,” Bray replies, his smile lighting up his face. “You missing having the best roomy?”

Kal scoffs, and I can’t help but grin because we all know Cope is living his best life without Bray around.

“You’re fucking joking, ain’t ya, boy? I’ve never had so much uninterrupted sleep in my life. And it’s a relief not to wake up to random bare asses.” Laughter erupts around us, but Cope slaps Brayden on the back playfully. “Of course I miss you,” he adds softly, making Bray’s smile turn shy. Sometimes, I think Bray forgets how deeply he’s loved by so many. The guy is so pure it makes me wonder how I got so lucky to have him as not only a best friend but a fucking brother.

“On that note of roomies.” Cope scratches his head, a hint of tension in his voice. “I’ve got a new one.”

“Bad luck,” I retort. “We all knew the dean wasn’t going to let that room stay empty for long.” I glance at Kal, who’s gone rigid beside me at the mention of the new roomie. I squint my eyes at him and nudge him, but he just looks at me tight-lipped, then shifts his gaze to Brayden and finally to Cope.

“It’s Daxton Rivers,” Cope mumbles. The name hangs in the air like a thunderclap, and everyone’s eyes snap to me. Something inside me detonates with those three words.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I scream, my voice echoing with raw fury.

“Trayton,” Kal growls, his voice a low, dangerous rumble.

“Shut up,” I spit out, my voice dripping with venom. “We’re not on the ice anymore, *Cap*.” I know he hates being called Cap by me and Bray. Kal is a born leader. That was always obvious from the moment I met him outside the ice rink when we were kids. He stormed up to me, even then, with that broody look in his eyes. For the first time in my life, I felt intimidated. He basically told me I was going to do drills with him. He barked orders at me the whole time, but I couldn’t help but follow every word that flowed from his mouth without hesitation.

Nowadays, that’s changed. You soon come to find, under that hard exterior, Kal is a fucking teddy bear who loves his friends more than life. So I just about listen to him on the ice. That’s as far as it goes.

“We’re in the fucking locker room, you dick,” he snaps, wrapping his hand in a firm grip on my shoulder. “Don’t start, Trayton.”

“Don’t start?” I laugh, throwing my head back.

Bray groans. “You telling Tray not to start is like waving Vin Diesel’s ass in Tray’s face and telling him he can’t bite it. He’s gonna fucking bite it.”

“Daxton fucking Rivers is staying in the fucking dorms? In my teammate’s room? How? Why?” I demand, my eyes boring into Kal. I know exactly why he went rigid—because he fucking knows. His dad is the highest on the board at this uni. I can guarantee it was his dad who gave the approval for it.

“I will talk to you like an adult when you calm the fuck down,” Kal grits out.

“How can you be okay with this, Bray?” I turn my attention to Brayden, whose eyes soften.

“You know it’s not his fault, Tray.”

“It’s his family’s, which makes it his. He didn’t stop them, Bray. He sat right beside them and joined in whatever fuckery they were up to. He has Bexley’s blood on his hands just as much as his low-life father and uncle.” I spit the words out, each one laced with bitterness.

Brayden flinches. “Hey, shut the fuck up and sit down,” Kal says. “I won’t hesitate to drop-kick your ass if you carry on.”

“I don’t get how you can all be okay with this.” I throw my hands up in exasperation. “He’s the scum of the earth.”

“Look,” Brayden begins, but he’s interrupted by Coach.

“Trayton, please tell me why you can’t ever keep that fucking trap shut. Not even for five fucking minutes.” He groans. “What are you moaning about now?”

“The piece of scum that is Daxton fucking Rivers, that’s who.”

“Trayton,” Coach barks, “I need you to come—”

“If I’m a piece of scum, then you’re the whole fucking sewer.” Everything inside me freezes—even my breathing. I turn slowly on my heels, facing the one person I despise most on this earth. The one face that makes my fists itch to connect every time I catch a glimpse of it around campus.

Daxton Rivers glares back at me with a hatred so intense it could burn through steel. Gone is the quivering mess who cried beneath my blows last year. Gone is the guy with the permanently sad face, the one who wouldn’t say boo to a ghost. Now, Daxton Rivers vibrates with rage, his eyes flashing with murderous intent. His jet-black hair, now shorter, sweeps off his head in a near-perfect style, yet still looks like he’s run his fingers through it, with the loose strands hanging over his eyes. His bright-green eyes, edged with darkness, that remind me of a viper, lock onto me. New tattoos peek

out from under his oversize sweater, dark, black swirls wrapping around his neck. He’s like some brooding avenging angel. Pft. More like devil.

“What did you just say, Quiet Boy?” I snarl, my voice low and menacing. “Trayton, Daxton.” Dean Miller, who stands beside Daxton, gestures toward Coach’s office. “Office, now!” he bellows, his voice echoing through the locker room. A sinister smile spreads across my face. Whatever I just saw in Daxton’s eyes has slightly dampened my anger. All I can think about now is the thrill of ruining this guy and making him regret ever stepping foot in Hawksview University.

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Chapter Four

Daxton

"Daxton, I know there have been issues with some of the players on the hockey team, but Coach Denny is going to straighten it out. It will be fine. We really think you can do this school and yourself justice with this project," Mr. Jenkins says in his annoyingly calm voice, which grates on my nerves when I'm feeling like this. I don't want to be spoken to like a child who's gone ape shit and is now being coddled by one of those gentle parents who just can't accept they have a little shit for a kid.

"I'm not doing it," I growl, feeling my temper rise. He's not fucking listening. "I hate hockey—like, hate it. And I hate one of the players—you of all people know this—and the feeling is fucking mutual." I don't even care that I'm swearing in front of a teacher right now. Mr. Jenkins winces before sighing, a small smile playing on his lips, and I swear to God, if he uses that calming voice one more time, I'll blow a fucking gasket and probably get myself put right back in that damn trailer. But right now, that seems preferable. "And let's not forget, he's one of the star players." My voice escalates as I slam my fist on the table, and I'm not done, even when Mr. Jenkins clutches his chest and steps back a couple of paces. Usually, this would instantly make me feel bad. I know what it's like to be around people who constantly lose their temper with you, but I've held in too much and let way too many people walk over me. "Not only do you want me to put emotion and story into this," I say, staring Mr. Jenkins straight in the

eye, noting his continuous blinking that betrays his nervousness around me, “you want me to get up close and personal, follow the fucking guys around like a lost puppy, do interviews with them, draw them in play? Do you even hear yourself right now? You know everything that went down last year.” My breath comes out choppy from the sheer panic that filters through me. I can’t lose this scholarship, but I can’t do what they’re asking. What they need me to fucking do to keep this scholarship.

“I believe in you, Daxton.” That’s all Mr. Jenkins says before giving me a tight smile and walking off. Is he fucking serious?

“I believe in you, Daxton.” I mimic a kid’s voice. “Is that all you have to say?” My anger increases again as I follow after him. “How can I put emotion and story into something I can’t stand? You need a connection when doing something like this. You need to have a love for it,” I remind Mr. Jenkins. “What about my street art? I can go to the homeless shelter, speak with the people there. I can go to the recovery centers and speak with recovering alcoholics and drug addicts? That’s something I’m interested in; that’s something I can create a story out of and put a shit ton of emotion into. You know I can.” Mr. Jenkins stops and turns slowly, releasing a deep sigh. “Please,” I beg him. “Please, sir. Anything but this. Anything.”

“It’s set, Daxton. It’s what Dean Miller and I have agreed. I’m sorry.” With those words, Mr. Jenkins disappears. Anger consumes me, and I pick up the nearest object, flinging it across the room, then watch it crash into someone’s art hanging on the wall. Right now, I don’t give a shit.

Right now, all I need is to let go.

Calm. Slow. Peaceful.

Everything feels lighter, like a warm, fuzzy blanket wrapping around me. My thoughts slow down, drifting like lazy clouds in a summer sky. Nothing bothers me, and everything that once felt like a looming storm now seems distant and insignificant. This is what I needed—what I had craved. I needed to let go, to escape the weight of my worries. I promised myself when I left that place that I would never smoke weed again. I was

determined to leave all that behind, but after today, I had no choice. I couldn’t calm myself down naturally; the anxiety gnawing at my insides was too much to bear. I had to turn to drugs instead.

Not surprisingly, it wasn’t hard to get.

It’s only the first day, and I’ve already ruined it.

I turn, shifting my position to lay my head at the foot of the bed. I drag my pillow with me. As I lay my head down, I find myself staring up at the picture I drew for Bex. A wave of emotion surges through me, my chest begins to heave, and suddenly, a laugh bursts out, raw and uncontrollable. “You fucker.” I laugh, voice trembling. “This is all you. I know it is.” This has Bexley written all over it. “If you’re listening, just know I won’t come and see you anymore until you fix this,” I say, forcing a smile despite the tears threatening to spill. Deep down, I know it’s not true. I will always go to his graveside until my last dying breath. Sitting up with a sigh, I quickly wipe the tear away. This won’t do. I can’t give up just based on what Mr. Jenkins said; I need to see Dean Miller.

I stand outside the dean’s office, my heart pounding in my chest. The hallway is eerily quiet. The only sound is the ticking of the clock on the wall. I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. This is it. I have to make the dean understand how much I don’t want to do the project.

Knocking, I steel myself, and a voice from inside calls out, “Come in.”

I push the door open and step inside. The dean, a stern-looking man with glasses perched on the end of his nose, looks up from his desk. “Ah, Daxton. Please, have a seat.”

I sit down, my hands clenched into fists in my lap. “Dean Miller, I need to talk to you about the project.”

Dean Miller subtly sighs and raises an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“I… I don’t want to do it,” I blurt out. “I know it’s important, but I just can’t. It’s too much for me right now.”

The dean leans back in his chair, studying me. “How’s that?” He says it almost sarcastically, like he’s been waiting for this visit all day. Like he

knew it was coming.

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words. Trying to find the right bullshit for me to get out of this. “It’s not just the workload. It’s everything. I’m struggling with my other classes, and I have personal stuff going on. I just can’t handle this on top of everything else.”

The dean nods slowly but remains firm. “I understand that you’re under a lot of pressure, Daxton. However, this project is a crucial part of your education. You have no choice but to complete it. It’s designed to challenge you and help you grow.”

“I know,” I say, my voice trembling for dramatic effect. “But I’m already at my breaking point. I’m afraid if I take on this project, I’ll fail everything else.”

The dean’s gaze hardens. “I’m sorry, Daxton, but the project is nonnegotiable. You must find a way to manage your time and responsibilities. We can offer support, but ultimately, you have to do the work.”

I feel a wave of defeat wash over me. Followed up quickly by anger. “Thank you, Dean,” I say. “For nothing,” I mutter.

The dean’s eyes harden into squints. “Take care of yourself, Daxton. And remember, we’re here to help you succeed.” Then he holds his hand up. “Actually, I think it’s best if you meet with Coach Denny now. He can help you manage your time and responsibilities more effectively.”

“Now?” I stare in disbelief. This can’t be happening right now. Why did I come here? This has got to be the worst day in fucking history.

My stomach churns at the thought of meeting Coach Denny. I’ve heard stories about his intense behavior and strict expectations. As we walk toward Coach Denny’s office, my mind races with dread. I feel like I’m heading for my execution, every step heavier than the last.

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Chapter Five

Trayton

"Over my dead body will that piece of shit be joining our team." As if fucking Coach and Dean Miller have agreed to this. My blood simmers as I look over at a scowling Daxton, who doesn't take his eyes off me. "Bet you're loving this, aren't you?" I glare in his direction.

"Trust me, this is the last place I want to be," Daxton spits out in pure hatred, letting his eyes move up and down me like I'm trash on the sidewalk.

This prick.

"Trust me, Daxton, the feeling is fucking mutual. If your presence could be any more intolerable, I might just consider crawling through broken glass to escape it. But then again"—I smirk—"watching you squirm in this 'last place you want to be' is almost worth it." My smirk widens into a full-blown grin when I see his jaw clench tightly and his nostrils flare.

I love getting under people's skin.

"Both of you, shut the fuck up!" Coach bellows. His voice booms across the room, silencing everyone. Daxton's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline as he snaps his head toward Coach in shock.

"Excuse me," he says, oblivious to Coach's solid authority. The intensity of Coach's voice isn't just for show. In the world of hockey, where tempers flare and the stakes are high, a few harsh words are part of the game. We all

swear like sailors here. It’s therapeutic. It’s a method to command respect and control in a team full of adrenaline-charged players.

“You’re not excused,” Coach responds, unflinching, not a single eyelid batting.

“Everyone, be quiet,” Dean Miller commands, rubbing his fingertips into his eyes and placing a hand on his hip. “The Devil Hawks are doing brilliantly for Hawksview. We were all over the media last season, and we need to keep that momentum. Hawksview needs this. People need to see what a great university this is for every field, not just sports. That’s why I brought in Daxton. He’s exceptionally talented and can bring real passion to this sport.”

“Hold up—” I cut Dean Miller off. “We’re the fucking heart of this sport.”

“Language, Trayton.” Coach clips me round the back of the head. The irony is laughable.

The dean’s jaw clenches, struggling to hold his composure.

“You have a heart? That’s laughable.” Daxton sneers.

“Jesus Christ,” Coach mutters under his breath.

“That’s it!” Dean Miller’s hand slams down on Coach’s desk with a resounding thud. “Trayton, if you don’t cut this high school crap, you’re off the team. Kiss those scouts goodbye.” I gape at him, then turn my eyes to Coach.

“Coach.” I croak the words, and I have to admit, Coach looks just as taken back as me. But he schools it as he raises his chin and keeps his eyes on the dean.

“Daxton, you can kiss all of this goodbye—your dorm, your final grade, everything—if you don’t comply.” Daxton huffs, his jaw tensing to the point of breaking. His glare shifts from the dean to me, pure hatred flashing in his eyes.

“Fine.” I grind my teeth, but then I take another look at his face. The raw hatred radiates from him, and I can’t help but find satisfaction in it. With a broad smile, I stand up, pushing my chair back, and stare down at Daxton before flashing him a wink.

“Oh, *so* fine by me.” As I leave Coach’s office, my smile widens, thinking of all the hell I’m going to bring to this guy.

A little while later, I hear many choice words from Kal while I get changed into my gear, telling me to sort myself out. Daxton exits the office with Dean Miller and Coach.

“Everyone.” Coach’s deep voice booms through the locker room. I steel my shoulders, taking a deep breath before I turn around and have the misfortune of facing the trash that entered this room. “Listen up.” Everyone gives Coach their attention. “This is Daxton Rivers; he is doing his art project on ‘The Art of Ice Hockey.’ This is great for the university and will give people a clearer understanding that it’s not just a puck and a bunch of bloodthirsty guys in skates with some sticks.” In that moment, I see Daxton roll his eyes because I can guarantee that is exactly what he probably thinks hockey is. “Daxton will be watching closely at how you play, your moves, your skills. He’ll capture this through various mediums, such as photography, sketches, or even written pieces. He’ll get the information for his writing from interviews with you. Daxton’s project will be a multimedia collage and will be posted on the Hawksview’s website when completed.”

“He must be good,” Kal mutters.

“He is,” Brayden whispers. “Bex always went on about his drawings.”

Of course he fucking did.

“You will treat Daxton with respect. A waiver will be available for you to sign tomorrow before training. This is for your approval for photography and interviews.” Coach claps his hands. “Any questions?”

“I do.” I raise my hand.

“Shock,” Coach mutters. “Go on.”

“What are the conditions if you don’t sign the waiver?” I ask because if there’s a way I don’t have to do this, then they can all kiss my ass. I don’t want that trash uttering any words to me or taking any of my pictures.

Coach stares at me with a bored expression. “You don’t play,” Coach deadpans.

“Wait, but—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Kal says, gripping the back of my neck and squeezing as tight as he can, causing me to bend in half and move my head to one side from the pain.

“Ouch!” I whine.

“Thank you, Kal,” Coach says. “Any more questions?”

Immediately, everyone goes quiet and mumbles their nos. “Perfect.” Coach beams. I flip Kal off before moving my gaze to everyone. Some people know who Daxton is, who his family is, and they look at him like the piece of scum he is, but some don’t, or they don’t care and look at him with curiosity. By this time next week, I will make sure everyone on this team hates him and will make this whole fucking project his living nightmare.

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Chapter Six

Daxton

Everything inside me screams to open my eyes, but I can't. Something heavy presses down on me, pinning me in place. I try to move, but my limbs are paralyzed. An overbearing smell invades my senses—the acrid stench of smoke mixed with cheap whiskey. My stomach churns violently. It's him. It's my father.

I squirm, desperation clawing at my insides. "Please. Stop."

His voice, rough and commanding, cuts through the haze. "You will be coming home, Daxton. You're not fucking staying here. You're coming home to where you belong. Have you got that?"

Rough hands seize me, shaking me. "Daxton."

"I'll go. I'll come home," I whisper, my voice trembling with fear.

"Daxton." The voice persists, dragging me back to consciousness. I finally open my eyes, bracing myself to see his face looming over me, his fingers digging into my arms. But when I open my eyes, it's not my father. It's Cope. I glance around, disoriented. My bedside lamp casts a soft glow.

I'm in my dorm. My dad isn't here. I don't have to go back to the trailer.

My eyes drift back to Cope. His brows are furrowed, and worry is etched in his eyes as they flicker between mine.

"You good?" he asks, his gaze boring into me.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry," I mutter, sitting up. Cope backs away and drops onto his bed, his eyes never leaving mine.

“What was that about?” he questions, concern evident in his voice.

“Oh, just a bad dream, I think,” I say, hoping he doesn’t press it. The last thing I want to do is talk about my dad. The very thought of him makes my stomach knot with unease.

Cope’s silence hangs heavy in the air, but he doesn’t pry. Instead, he just nods, still watching me with a look of concern. “All right, man. I’m gonna try to get some more sleep. You sure you’re good, yeah?”

“Yeah, thanks, Cope,” I reply, forcing a smile. He gives me a final nod before rolling over and settling back into his bed.

I lie back down, staring at the ceiling. Sleep is the last thing on my mind. The remnants of the nightmare cling to me, refusing to let go. I take a deep breath, trying to ground myself in the present. Cope’s quiet breathing from across the room is oddly comforting, but my thoughts are still racing.

I think about my father and the trailer I once called home. The memories are like ghosts, haunting the edges of my mind. I know I have to move forward, but the past is a heavy burden to carry.

After a while, I close my eyes again, willing myself to calm down. Tomorrow is another day, and I need to face it without the shadows of the past looming over me.

This time, when I wake, the fear isn’t there. My heart isn’t pounding out of my chest. I can feel the smooth sheets beneath me, a stark contrast to the rough, bare mattress I used to lie on in the trailer. The air I breathe isn’t stuffy and suffocating; it’s clear and refreshing, filling my lungs with ease.

I keep my eyes closed for a moment, savoring the calm. The remnants of the nightmare still linger, but I remind myself that I’m safe. I take a deep breath, allowing the smoke-free air to ground me.

Finally, I allow my eyes to flutter open, and the brightness of the room causes me to wince. The light is a welcome change from the oppressive darkness of my old room. I blink a few times, letting my eyes adjust.

As I take in my surroundings, I feel an overwhelming sense of relief. The room is clean and well-lit, the complete opposite of the dingy,

claustrophobic space I once called home. I can see my belongings neatly arranged, my desk with books and papers, and the soft glow of my bedside lamp that is still on.

I take another deep breath, letting the calm wash over me. I'm safe. For the first time in what feels like forever, I don't have to worry about what might lurk in the shadows. I don't have to fear the nights or dread the mornings.

I'm in a place where I can breathe, where I can finally start to heal. The nightmare may still haunt me, but right now, in this moment, I know I am safe.

The bathroom door swings open, and a wave of steam billows out as Cope steps into the room, wrapped in a towel. My eyes instantly drop to his body—because, hello, who could not appreciate that physique? His abs are chiseled to perfection, each muscle defined and taut. I gulp and quickly avert my gaze. The last thing I need is to be caught checking him out.

"You sleep better?" Cope's voice startles me, pulling me out of my thoughts. He's standing at the end of my bed, another towel in hand, drying his hair.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks," I mutter, giving him a tight-lipped smile. I pray my cheeks aren't flaming right now. Does he know I'm gay? Sharing a room with him is one thing, but does he care that I like guys? I've never had to worry about something like this before. I'm assuming not. He shared a room with Brayden. But Brayden was his friend. I'm not.

Cope doesn't seem to notice my internal turmoil. He nods and tosses the towel he was just using on his hair onto his bed.

"Look, don't worry about Trayton. I'll handle him." Instantly, my defenses shoot up. Like I would be worried about Trayton King. I scrunch my face and glare at Cope.

"I can assure you that Trayton King is the least of my worries. I barely give that guy a second thought." Technically, it's not a lie. I don't think about him anymore. Not like I used to.

Cope smirks and nods his head. "Good." Then, in a flash, Cope drops his towel, his bare ass staring me in the face. I whip my neck to the left, trying to avoid the sight. What the heck is he doing? "How's the project going?" he asks. I see movement out of the corner of my eye, but I dare not look in his direction.

"U-uh. Yeah. Gr-great," I stutter. "Fine," I clarify.

“Daxton.”

“Mm.”

“You can look at me, you know.”

I slowly turn my head, keeping my eyes on Cope’s face, who is biting his lip, trying his hardest to hold in his laugh.

“We’re all guys, Dax.”

“I’m gay,” I blurt out. Way to go, Daxton. “I just-I mean…”

“So are half my friends.” Cope cuts in, like it’s no big deal, which makes me ease slightly.

“I just wanted you to know. I thought I should tell you.”

“It’s cool.” Cope shrugs, pulling on a black pair of sweatpants. “It doesn’t bother me if you thought that might be the case.”

“Okay, good.” I smile, standing up and heading toward the shower.

“Oh, Dax,” Cope calls out. I turn, raising my eyebrows in question. “One of the guys on the team, Smithson, it’s his birthday, and he’s throwing a party at his place on Saturday. You should come.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s a good idea. But thanks.” I give him a tight, almost strained smile before opening the bathroom door.

“I thought Tray didn’t bother you.” I snap my head around to look at Cope, my expression hardening.

“He doesn’t,” I reply, perhaps a bit too aggressively. The words come out sharper than I intended.

“Then there’s no reason why you can’t come on Saturday,” he says with a disarming smile before grabbing his bag. “Catch you later,” he adds, and exits the room quickly.

Standing there, I shake my head. There’s not a chance I’ll be attending that party. The thought of being around Trayton King and his cronies sounds about as appealing as a root canal without anesthesia. The mere idea of it makes my skin crawl.

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Chapter Seven

Trayton

Opening my eyes, I lie there for a minute, planning out my day in my head. I've always believed that if I don't mentally plan exactly what I'm doing, the whole day will go to shit.

1. Get up
2. Make Kal roll his eyes at least once
3. Shower
4. Eat
5. Go to first class
6. Eat
7. Go to second class
8. Eat
9. Come back to the dorm and get ready for training
10. Pre-training food
11. Training
12. Make Kal roll his eyes again

13. Make Brayden smile
14. Post-training food
15. Dinner
16. Sleep

“What’s your list looking like today?” Kal’s voice breaks through my internal thoughts as I move my eyes to his bed on the other side of the room.

“Tiring,” I groan, standing up and stretching.

“Trayton,” Kal growls, and I stop stretching to glance at him. He’s staring over at me with a not-too-impressed expression on his face.

“What?”

“You know what.”

“Oh, you couldn’t get past a day without seeing my dick. It’s woken up to say hello to you, Cap,” I tease, swinging my hips gently from side to side to give Kal a little wiggle. Immediately, Kal rolls his eyes and turns over in bed. One and two on the list—done. Now I can get on with three.

Standing in the shower, I let the hot water cascade over me, trying to wash away my growing anxiety. I’ve been perfecting my techniques, knowing that this season could be the one that finally gets me signed. The thought of making it big always ignites a fire within me, but it also brings a familiar, gnawing worry. What about Brayden and Kal?

I scrub my body with intensity, hoping to remove the unease, but it clings to me stubbornly. Stepping out of the shower, I wrap a towel around my waist and return to the bedroom.

“Oh, he hides it for once,” Kal teases from across the room.

“Kal.”

“Tray.”

I hesitate before sitting on my bed. “What happens if we get signed to completely different states?” I look at Kal, seeking the reassurance only he can provide.

Kal frowns slightly, then shifts on his bed to face me. “It will probably happen, Tray. Between the three of us, what are the chances of us being near each other?”

I nod slowly, my gaze dropping to a spot on the floor.

“It’s only May, Tray. We have nearly a year until any of this,” he says, trying to sound reassuring.

“I know.” I hesitate again. “I just… I don’t want to lose you both.” My voice is soft, almost a whisper. I hate speaking like this, hate feeling weak. But when it comes to Brayden and Kal, my defenses crumble. I don’t know what I would do without them.

“Just because we won’t see each other every day doesn’t mean we’ll lose each other, Tray.” Kal’s voice is gentle yet firm.

I manage a tight smile, nodding. I try to push the nagging voice to the back of my mind, but it persists.

Everyone always leaves.

Striding out of the locker room, I breathe in the cold, crisp air. I can already hear the sounds of skates slicing the ice and pucks hitting the boards. The anticipation builds as I head to the rink, ready for another tough training session.

The ice sparkles under the bright lights, and as soon as my skates touch the surface, a rush of excitement washes over me. This is where I belong. Every worry seems to vanish, leaving only the thrill of the game.

I glide across the ice, straight toward my teammates. Kal gives me a nod, and Brayden flashes a quick smile before his eyes flicker behind me and then back to me again, wincing slightly. Frowning, I spin on my skates. And there he is—Daxton—leaning against the boards, watching with that infuriatingly calm demeanor. I’d almost forgotten he’d be here today. My mood sours instantly. A small smirk appears on his lips before he fakes a yawn.

“Break a leg, King—literally,” he calls out, his laughter echoing through the rink as he collapses back into his chair with a smug grin plastered on his face.

“Who does this guy think he is? Who’s been feeding him bravery flakes for breakfast?” I mutter under my breath, my words laced with disbelief. I watch as he arches one eyebrow at me, a cocky smirk playing on his lips.

Without taking his eyes off me, he picks up a colossal sketching pad and pen, lifting it dramatically to obscure his face.

“Keep those soulless eyes on me, Rivers, and enjoy the show. It’s the closest you’ll ever get to real talent,” I taunt, my voice dripping with venom. The sketch pad lowers ever so slightly, revealing his eyes, ablaze with heated intensity that makes me believe he could burn the entire rink with just a glance. His gaze flickers down to the pad momentarily before snapping back to mine. He winks, a gesture that sends a shiver down my spine, before raising the pad once more.

“This—” I begin, my voice trembling with rage.

“Stop,” Brayden interrupts sharply. “Just pretend he’s not even there. He knows taunting you is going to get a rise out of you, and then fists are going to start swinging. Remember what the dean said.” My jaw tightens, the muscles straining as I take one last, seething look at the back of that infuriating sketch pad before forcing myself to turn away.

The rink is buzzing with activity; the sound of blades slicing through ice fills the air as we go through our drills. I skate with determined accuracy, every move a testament to my dedication. The coach’s whistle echoes sharply, directing us through our paces, urging us to push harder, skate faster, be stronger.

My breath forms clouds in the cold air, my focus solely on the puck in front of me. I weave through my teammates, my stick handling the puck with practiced ease. But out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Daxton, sitting off to the side, sketch pad in hand.

With a grunt of frustration, I try to ignore him, redirecting my attention back to the drill. But every time I glance over, Daxton’s eyes are fixed on me, the pencil in his hand moving furiously across the paper. The intensity in his gaze is almost palpable, as if he’s pouring every ounce of his concentration into capturing the moment.

My annoyance bubbles to the surface. I slap the puck toward the goal with unnecessary force, the loud smack echoing through the rink. I take a deep breath, attempting to regain my focus, but my eyes betray me, drawn back to Daxton. I see his brows furrow in concentration, his hand moving with swift, deliberate strokes.

“Come on, Trayton, keep your head in the game!” Kal’s voice snaps me back to reality, and I nod, shaking off my distraction. I force myself to

concentrate back on the drill, but it's no use. Every time I look over, Daxton is there, his eyes a beacon of focus.

The rest of the team continues their practice, oblivious to the silent battle I'm currently having with Daxton. My frustration mounts with each passing second, my movements becoming more aggressive—more erratic. Daxton, on the other hand, remains calm, a slight smirk playing on his lips as he sketches, as if he knows exactly the effect he's having.

Prick.

Finally, the coach blows the whistle, signaling the end of the practice. I skate off the ice, my jaw clenched in frustration. I can feel Daxton's eyes on me, even now, the weight of his gaze impossible to ignore.

As I grab a towel and wipe the sweat from my brow, I glance over at him one last time. His sketch pad is lowered, and our eyes lock in a silent challenge. I drag my skates back to the locker room, feeling the weight of frustration bearing down on me. Slumping down in front of my locker, I let out a heavy sigh.

"King, whatever is on your mind, fucking remove it. You played like a child throwing a tantrum today," Coach bellows, his voice reverberating through the locker room. His words cut deep, a harsh reminder of my flaky performance.

"That's because he is," Kal chimes in, frowning down at me as he comes to stand beside me. His tone is laced with disdain, and I can feel the judgment radiating from him.

"Fuck off," I snap back, my voice dripping with irritation as I lock eyes with Kal. He just rolls them—his signature move when it comes to me. I shift my gaze to Brayden, who bites his lip, trying to hold back a smile, but fails miserably as a laugh bursts out of him.

"Bray," Kal moans, frustration clear in his tone.

"Sorry, but the way you talk to him sometimes, it's like he's your child who never listens, and you look like you're at your wits' end," Brayden says, his laughter still bubbling up despite his attempt to stifle it.

"Well, he needs to start acting his age," Kal mumbles as he locks eyes with mine. "You know I will always tell you how it is, but you're not acting twenty, Tray. You're acting like you're sixteen again." His words hit me like a punch to the gut. I know exactly what he's getting at. He's the only one who knows about me and Bexley. I never told Brayden, and to this day, he

remains in the dark. I guess I just didn't want my relationship with Bexley to drive a wedge between me and Brayden, who I love like a brother.

I wince slightly, memories flooding back. Bexley wasn't just my best friend; he was the person I *thought* I was in love with. It was different from the brotherly love I have for Brayden. When Bexley told me he couldn't be with me anymore, it broke me. Seeing him kiss Daxton that day pushed me over the edge. I lost control, went to our local rink, and smashed the locker room to pieces. I skated like a madman, whacking pucks around the rink with recklessness.

Some people saw me on my rampage, and someone called Kal. Thankfully, they didn't contact Brayden. In my psychotic state, I doubt I could have beared to see his face. It was too much like Bexley. They had their differences, and once you knew them, you could tell them apart—but they were identical twins. Even if I knew it was Brayden, I don't know what I would have said at that moment.

Kal was there in an instant, calming me, skating with me, playing hockey with me, not saying anything, just waiting for me to calm down. In the end, I told him everything. He was shocked and surprised how well we hid it. I told him about Bexley leaving me for Daxton, and Daxton clearly loving every minute of it from the way he watched me over Bexley's shoulder. I told him that day I was going to end Daxton, but Kal, being Kal, talked me down off the ledge. He said there would be other guys; I was only sixteen. Somehow, he tamed my manic mind.

I held back.

I stayed away.

I never gave Daxton a second glance.

I never said another word to Bexley again. And that's the one thing I regret. He hurt me. He fucking crushed me.

He was concrete proof that day that everyone leaves you in the end, and that's something I will never forget.

But Kal was right. Life went on, people moved on, and it didn't hurt anymore.

I forgave Bexley. We were young, but my stubbornness stopped me from telling him I forgave him, and then when he was putting Brayden through it, I couldn't help but be angry at him again. I saw how much he was crushing Brayden. He was good at hurting people without even realizing it.

Snapping myself back, Kal gazes down at me and gives me a tight smile.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—” I cut him off, raising my hand.

“It’s cool.”

Kal opens his mouth to say something, but my phone suddenly interrupts him. My gaze shifts to the screen, and instantly, all my previous frustrations evaporate. Excitement surges through me as I see the tattoo shop’s name flashing on the display.

“Hello?” I answer eagerly, standing and walking out of the locker room.

“Trayton?” a voice on the other end says.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Great, it’s Max from Bold Impressions. The artist wants to play around with your designs based on what you’ve shared and was wondering if you could come in next weekend.”

“Absolutely, I’ll be there,” I fire back at him, a broad smile spreading across my face. But then it falters slightly as doubt creeps in. “But I’ve only given a few ideas of what I want. Won’t he need to know the exact placements and details?”

“He wants to use his own creative freedom if that’s okay with you,” Max explains.

“Err…” I hesitate. I have a clear vision of what I want, and I’m not sure anyone else can bring it to life the way I imagine.

“I promise you, whatever he creates will exceed your expectations. Trust him, okay?” Max’s confident tone is reassuring.

“Okay,” I agree reluctantly. “If I don’t like it—”

“You don’t have to go with it. Don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Max.”

After ending the call, I turn to head back into the locker room, but my smile fades instantly. Daxton stares at me, leaning casually against the wall, his hands buried in his pockets, clearly having eavesdropped on the entire conversation.

“Have you not heard of privacy, Quiet Boy?” I grit out, struggling to keep my temper in check. The old Daxton is long gone, replaced by this new version who seems to be out for blood—my blood. I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me benched and not playing.

Daxton flashes a grin that’s larger than life. His sudden bravery has me grinding my molars, hard. He used to be so breakable, so easy to hurt. Now, he’s nothing like that. He’s made of steel, and not an ounce of sadness shines back at me.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize pizza ordering was so private,” he says, placing a hand dramatically across his chest. “My apologies, Trayton.” He straightens his lips and softens his brows, giving off an innocent look. Fucking pizza. What a prick.

“Watch it, Rivers,” I growl, feeling my temper teetering on the edge. It doesn’t take much to push me, and he fucking knows it.

His eyes drag down and back up my body, connecting with mine, with that new cocky smile of his.

“Not much to watch,” he says, before shouldering his way through the locker room door and leaving me there, stunned.

Did he really just say I wasn’t much to look at?

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Chapter Eight

Trayton

As I step into Dan's house, the beats of "Sicko Mode" by Travis Scott pulse through the speakers. The door barely clicks shut behind me before my friend Manny thrusts a beer into my hand, then turns to grab two more for Kal and Bray. We weave through the bustling crowd, exchanging backslaps and greetings with familiar and unfamiliar faces alike. That's the life of a devil—respected, resented, and desired by everyone. This last thought is confirmed when I feel sharp claws, quite literally, digging into my neck as a petite girl, no taller than five feet, clings to me. She tilts her head back to meet my gaze, her eyes sparkling as she takes in my six-foot-two frame. Her smile brightens even more when I flash her a grin. Everyone at this school knows I'm gay. Girls just don't do it for me. I've never felt the urge to try, and I've never even come close to wanting to. However, a few years ago, in a moment of drunken frustration, I kissed a girl. It was an experience that made my skin crawl. There was nothing wrong with her—she was quite pretty. But her lips were coated in this sticky gloss that made every movement feel like a struggle. Her tongue was small and hesitant, and the moment her soft hands cupped my face, I felt myself recoil. It felt so profoundly wrong. Even now, I get goose bumps thinking about it, and not in a good way. Yet, girls—or should I say puck bunnies—seem unfazed. They'll try anything to get what they want. Anything to sleep with me. Especially after a couple of years ago when a guy I slept with sent around

the dick pic I sent him as if it was meant to hurt my feelings. My DMs blew up, and when I say blew up, my actual phone froze and glitched out. It couldn't handle all the notifications. Since then, they don't seem to understand. I only want dick. Some even offered me their ass as if that would make it okay or offered to wear a strap on. I can be a man whore, but I still need the male connection. It's like these girls think I'm desperate. Off the top of my head, I can think of at least five guys I could call up now, and they'd be in my dorm, bent over as if they were waiting for a prostate examination.

"Tray, Tray," she singsongs in what she believes is a cute voice, but it's anything but. The sound makes me want to crawl out of my own skin and hide. Although my thoughts might paint me as a class-A cunt, I pride myself on being very nice to the ladies.

"Casey." I beam at her, but her face instantly drops.

"It's Katie," she corrects, her frown deepening. Despite my clear mistake, I choose to ignore it and lean down so my lips ghost her ear. Her breath catches as I whisper.

"Do you see that big, tall, brooding guy behind me? The one who looks like he's ready to choke-slam anyone who dares to step in his path?" Katie inclines her head to look behind me, and then her eyes meet mine, widened with what seems to be a mix of excitement and curiosity. She keeps her deer-in-the-headlights gaze locked on me as she nods eagerly.

"He's a bit…" I pause, searching for the perfect words to describe Kal—moody, an asshole with a perpetual stick up his ass. "Sad," I finally say, going with the simplest yet most fitting description.

"Oh," she murmurs, her brows furrowing as a look of sadness crosses her face. Despite this, she keeps her eyes locked on mine, clearly eager and hanging on my every word.

I make a point of glancing around the party, taking in the scene before meeting Katie's eyes again. "Out of all the girls here, I just know you're the one for him," I say, keeping my voice sincere.

She gasps softly, placing a hand on her chest. "Me?" she says, stunned.

"You," I confirm with a smile. Her cheeks turn crimson as she tips her head back to look at Kal, who's standing behind me. She then leans in closer to me and whispers, "But he doesn't talk to any girls anymore. My friend Cass tried so many times, and he shut her down every single time." She frowns, clearly puzzled.

Kal really needs to sort himself out. I don't know what's gotten into him over the last couple of years. He's always been a broody asshole, but not to this extent. He never turned down girls before. Bray and I try to leave him to his own devices because, well, like I said, he's a broody asshole. But I'm definitely talking to Bray later about sitting down with Kal because this needs to stop.

"I think you can make him better," I say with a wink, standing back up to my full height. She nods eagerly, a smile spreading across her face. As I walk away, I hear her innocent, petite voice call out, "Kal?" I smile to myself, biting my lip, and keep moving.

Within seconds, Bray catches up to me, laughing beside me. "He's so getting you back for that," he says, amusement clear in his voice.

I turn my head quickly, and instantly, Kal's eyes lock onto mine. His jaw is clenched, and his eyes are squinted, like he's planning every possible way he could kill me. I give him a wink and mime, "Loosen up," before turning my attention back to Brayden.

"He needs to get his dick wet. Maybe it'll stop him from being such a moody prick at practice." I smirk.

Brayden looks behind me at Kal, frowns, and then shifts his gaze back to me. "He's still not himself, is he?" he says, more to himself than to me.

"No, he's not. And we need to get to the bottom of whatever the hell happened," I reply, determination in my voice.

Brayden nods. "We'll talk to him soon."

I slap Brayden on the shoulder. "Now, let's get some shots." I grin, grabbing his arm and dragging him toward the kitchen.

Three shots and two beers later, I'm feeling relaxed—not really buzzed, but definitely more at ease as I sit on the kitchen counter, laughing and joking with Bray and Kal, who now smiles, after he, in his own *kind* way, told Katie to do one. Katie looked at me helplessly, like I had the answers on how she could get a hockey player's dick inside her, but I shrugged and gave her my most innocent, tight-lipped smile.

“Where’s Cope?” Bray asks, scanning the crowd in front of us.

I shrug. “Beats me.” Kal pulls out his phone, frowning down at it, typing away. “Who you texting?” I ask, trying to lean over to see. Kal tilts his phone away and slowly lifts his head to look at me.

“Your fucking dad, now fuck off,” he snaps.

“Good luck getting an answer from him,” I retort, not playing into his sarcasm and clear annoyance.

“Kal, what is going on with you lately? We’re your brothers. You know you can talk to us,” Brayden says. I tip my bottle, gulping down a few mouthfuls while side-eyeing Kal to check his expression. We can read each other like a book, and the minute Bray asks that question, Kal’s shoulders go rigid, like it’s the one question he doesn’t want to answer.

“I’m good, boys. Just trying to keep my head in the game and stay out of any drama,” he says in a bored tone, trying to sound unbothered by anything or anyone, including Brayden’s question.

“Then why are you standing there all rigid, like someone just stuck a second stick up your ass?” I deadpan.

Kal takes a visibly deep breath, his jaw clenching as he tries to maintain his composure. His eyes flicker with a mix of frustration and something deeper, something he’s clearly not ready to share. He finally exhales, his shoulders relaxing just a fraction, but the tension is still plain to see.

Brayden and I exchange a look, silently agreeing that we need to get to the bottom of whatever is bothering Kal. But for now, we let it slide, knowing that pushing him too hard might only make things worse.

Kal’s phone pings, and he pulls it out, reading a message. “Cope will be ten minutes,” he says, placing his phone back in his pocket.

“So, you were texting Cope.”

“Yes, Dad. Is that okay?” Kal sighs, picking up his beer, which he’s only taken two sips of since we’ve been here, and gulps the rest of it. He slams the empty beer bottle on the table and sighs deeply. “Sorry,” he mumbles, putting out his hand for me to grab, “I’m just tired.” Brayden’s eyes bounce from Kal’s to mine, and he raises his eyebrows.

“It’s cool,” I say, grabbing his hand and pulling him in for a bro hug. Soon after, we hear a few cheers coming from the front of the house, and then we hear Cope’s voice.

We also see a swarm of girls gravitating out of the kitchen, which causes me, Kal, and Brayden to look at each other, momentarily pausing, and then

we burst out laughing.

“Good luck to him.” Kal grins. Moments later, Cope struts through the kitchen door, a calm smile on his face. He loves the attention from girls, and he has one under each of his arms. Before I can even see who it is, Brayden erupts into laughter, his head flying back, and even Kal chuckles beside me. When I finally see what they do, I laugh so hard my eyes begin to water.

Katie stares at us, a smug grin on her face, not even caring that we’re laughing. She literally resembles the cat who got the cream right now. The pride radiates from her. These puck bunnies are wild as hell.

Just as the laughter dies down, the door swings open again, and in walks Daxton. My smile fades instantly, replaced by a scowl. What the hell is he doing here? My blood starts to boil as I watch him saunter in, acting like he owns the place.

“Trayton, calm down,” Brayden says, noticing my reaction. But I can’t. Daxton’s presence is like a red rag to a bull. And I’m the bull. He’s the last person I wanted to see tonight.

Daxton catches my eye and smirks, clearly enjoying the fact that he’s gotten under my skin. I clench my fists, trying to keep my anger in check. Kal notices and steps closer, his expression turning serious.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he warns, his voice low.

But it’s too late. I can feel the rage bubbling up inside me, ready to explode. Daxton’s smirk widens, and I know he’s doing this on purpose, just to get a rise out of me.

“Why the hell are you here, Daxton?” I growl, my voice barely controlled.

He shrugs nonchalantly. “Just here to have a good time, Trayton. No need to get all worked up.”

I take a step forward, but Kal grabs my arm, holding me back. “Not worth it, Tray,” he says firmly.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. But the sight of Daxton, standing here with that smug look on his face, makes it nearly impossible. This night just took a turn for the worse, and I’m not sure how much longer I can keep my cool.

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Chapter Nine

Daxton

I had no intention of coming to this damn party. Cope was antagonizing me the whole time he was getting ready, and I swore I wouldn't go. But he kept bringing up Trayton, saying not to let him get under my skin. I'm so over people thinking I'm that quiet, timid guy who accepts punches and doesn't retaliate. I'm sick of being seen as a pushover.

The moment Cope said, "Trayton will think he's got to you if you don't come," there was no turning back. Over my dead body will I let that guy get to me anymore. Last year, I was in a bad headspace; it felt like my world was crumbling, and then I lost my best friend. I've never felt so low in my life. But leaving that trailer was a fresh start for me. It was my new beginning, and there's no way I'm letting Trayton drag me back to that dark place.

Every step I took toward this party was fueled by my determination to prove that I'm not the same person I was then. As soon as I walked into this fucking kitchen and he saw me, I had to swallow whatever self-doubt was gnawing at my mind and put on my brave face. I needed to show this prick that I'm not the same guy. Even if sometimes I think I am. I'm not someone who seeks confrontation, but Trayton brings it out of me. Just seeing his face makes me want to scream.

It's funny how time changes our perspective of someone.

I never used to look at Trayton and want to scream.

It was the complete opposite, actually.

I used to look at him and instantly smile.

Then Bexley happened. That's why Trayton despises me. I've told myself a thousand times that his hatred is justified. I understand why he loathes me. But it was years ago. Why can't he let it go? We were just kids.

He blames me for so much.

What he doesn't realize is that I blame myself even more. I wish I could turn back time and change everything, but I can't.

"Let's go into the living room," Cope mutters, tugging on my hoodie.

I take one last glance at a seething Trayton, his stare burning into me, before I walk through the door to the living room with Cope. I spot the couch and notice a free seat at the end. I came here, proved myself, and now all I want to do is leave. I've shown him I'm not scared, and now I'm over it.

Cope pushes a bottle in my face, and I shake my head. I've got a lot of drawing to do tomorrow and need a clear head.

"One drink won't hurt," Cope insists, pushing the bottle right in front of my face again. I sigh, taking it from his hand. Maybe if I just take a sip, every time he looks at me, it'll make him happy.

I don't even know why he's trying so hard with me anyway. I sit back on the couch, pulling myself to the edge as more people squeeze in. The music blares, and I don't recognize a single song. I feel so far out of my comfort zone that I might as well be on Mars.

Why did I need to prove a point?

As I go to set my beer on the table and prepare to slip out since Cope has vanished from sight, that voice stops me dead in my tracks.

"Daxton Rivers." A smug-looking Jamie Vice comes into view as he stands in front of me, not leaving me any room to get up.

Why did you fucking come here, Daxton? For fuck's sake.

"Jamie," I reply—bored. Jamie is a cunt. That's the only way I can describe him. I was at a party last year; me and Bexley were there selling shit, and Jamie was drunk. He ended up walking into the bathroom when I was taking a piss, but he didn't turn around and walk out like any normal person. He stayed until I was finished and then literally threw himself onto me.

I instantly pulled back because no, just no. Jamie Vice is a fucking dick, and I've always known it. No way was he going to try to kiss me behind

some closed door while he was drunk and high on god knows what.

Turning him down unleashed a storm I wasn't prepared for. He spread lies around the school, claiming I made advances on him and even mocking how I smelled, saying I reeked like a garbage truck. This nightmare began before I even started at Hawksview. When I finally did, he made it his personal vendetta to tarnish my name, making everyone remember the fabricated stories he'd spun about me. People would stare, snicker, or dramatically sidestep me as I walked down the halls. It was downright humiliating.

"What drugs you selling today then?" He sneers, his voice dripping with sarcasm and malice.

"None, so go find someone else." My words are monotone.

"What brings"—he scans me from head to toe, a look of utter disgust contorting his features—"you here, then?"

"I was invited," I say flatly, attempting to rise, but he steps forward, forcing me back onto the couch.

"Who the hell would invite you?"

"Me. Now fuck off." Cope's voice cuts through the tension from behind him, making Jamie whirl around.

"Why would you invite him here, Cope?" Jamie's voice is laced with an icy edge, his eyes locked on Cope, though a flicker of fear betrays him.

"Because I can. Got a problem with that?"

"Leave it, Cope. I'm heading off," I say, standing up again. This time, Jamie retreats, making a show of sniffing the air.

"Still reeks," he mutters under his breath.

"What the hell did you just say?" Cope steps toward Jamie, towering over him, his presence menacing.

"Whoa, whoa. Killer, take it easy." Trayton appears out of nowhere, brushing my arm as he tries to reach Cope. I step aside as he pulls Cope back.

"What did you say to my boy to get him riled up like that?" Trayton's eyes narrow at Jamie.

"Say it again, I dare you," Cope seethes, his voice a low growl.

"N-nothing," Jamie stammers, his face paling as he frowns up at Cope. He sidesteps, walking away, but not before shooting me a death glare that could bury me six feet under.

The last thing I need is to be back on Jamie's radar.

“How about a game of truth or dare to lighten the mood?” Some annoying girl singsongs, standing on the couch next to me with two bottles of vodka in her hands, clearly three sheets to the wind.

Truth or dare? What are we —ten? I’m definitely out of here.

“Sit,” Cope growls through gritted teeth, clamping his hand on my shoulder and shoving me back onto the couch. I glance up at him, but his eyes are locked on Jamie, who has slinked to the other side of the room, chatting with his friend.

“I’m not playing truth or dare, Cope.” I sigh, exasperated.

“Humor me,” Cope says, a smile tugging at his lips as he sits down in the now-vacant spot next to me.

My eyes follow the girl with the vodka bottles as she stands in the center of the room, spinning around as if searching for something. She strides over to a large glass bowl, empties the vodka into it, and then places the now-empty bottle in the middle of the floor.

“We’re not boring, guys,” she drawls. “Make it juicy.” She winks, prompting a few guys to catcall, and one even goes over to the stereo to turn down the volume.

“Gabby, you spin first,” she says, her voice trembling with excitement as she bounces on her bare feet, clapping her hands like a child on Christmas Morning. Gabby spins the bottle, and it lands on some dude I don’t know.

“Joe, truth or dare?” Gabby asks, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Dare, obviously.” The guy winks confidently.

“I dare you to get your ass over here and slap a kiss right here.” She points to her lips and with what I’m guessing is supposed to be a seductive smirk.

“Yes, ma’am,” the guy, Joe, says instantly, up on his feet in seconds. After they literally eat each other’s mouths, another girl spins the bottle, and it lands on a girl this time. She picks truth, and I watch as the other girl asks her something that clearly makes her uncomfortable. I have no idea what they’re saying because I’ve completely tuned them out. Suddenly, Cope’s laughter snaps me back to reality. Trayton is sitting next to him, whispering something in his ear, and both guys are watching the two girls make out across the room. I scan around and see that most of the guys are doing the same thing, like a pack of dogs drooling over watching their prey. I roll my eyes and shuffle to the edge of the couch so I can try to make my getaway before Cope realizes.

But just as I go to stand up, a girl's voice breaks through my thoughts.

"Daxton, isn't it?" she says across from me, sitting on the floor, with her legs crossed.

I frown before answering with a hesitant, "Uh, yeah."

"Truth or dare?" she asks, her eyes glinting mischievously.

"What?" I furrow my brows in confusion, then look down at the bottle on the floor, pointing directly at me.

"Truth. Or. Dare," she says, speaking as if I'm a small child who needs things spelled out for them.

"Oh." I chuckle. "I'm not playing; I'm leaving." I start to stand up, but Trayton's voice stops me and makes me grind my teeth.

"Of course you pussy out." He laughs. I see Cope punch his leg, causing him to hiss in pain. Why do I feel the need to prove myself to this jerk? He gives me a smug look and raises one eyebrow slightly, like it's a challenge.

Just go home, Daxton. You don't care what these people think of you.

No, I don't. But for some messed-up reason, I care what *this* guy thinks of me.

"Dare," I grit out while keeping my gaze focused on Trayton.

My stare remains fixed on him, refusing to look away even as Gabby's words sink in. A chill runs down my spine as I realize what I've just agreed to, but it's not the fact that I said dare that leaves me breathless and stumbling over my words. It's the next part, the impossible demand she makes with a nonchalant tone that hides the harsh intent behind it.

"Sorry, wh-what?" I stammer, my voice betraying my shock and fear.

"I dare you to get on your hands and knees and crawl to Trayton like a dog, then plant a kiss on his lips," she states matter-of-factly, her eyes glinting with malicious glee as though she's reciting lines from a dark tale. "And I want tongue," she demands, her voice dripping with lust and malice. My heart pounds in my chest as I watch Trayton's eyes sparkle with wicked delight. He leans back on the sofa, spreading his legs wide and beckoning me to kneel before him.

"On your knees, Rivers," he taunts, sadistic pleasure in his voice at the thought of seeing me submit. My bravery crumbles as my heart races in my chest. I shake my head frantically.

"I-I'm not doing it," I stammer weakly.

Trayton's grin widens, his predatory gaze roaming over my trembling form. "Didn't think so." He sneers. Before I can say anything else, Jamie's

voice breaks through the silence that now blankets the room.

“Don’t worry, Daxton. I’ll take that dare for you.” Trayton’s attention shifts away from me as Jamie crawls onto his lap, wrapping his arms around Trayton’s neck and locking lips with him. My stomach churns as I watch Trayton’s tongue invade Jamie’s mouth, and Jamie’s hips move in response. I am frozen in shock, unable to look away as Trayton dominates the kiss.

Leave, Daxton. Fucking move—do something. Stop watching.

The sound of a girl beside me commenting on how hot they look doesn’t even register as I’m lost in the intensity of the moment. But suddenly, something snaps inside me a few moments later as I hear her words, and I realize that I need to do something.

With all my willpower, I tear myself away and make a beeline for the door. My heart is pounding so hard it feels like it might burst out of my chest. But just as I reach for the handle, something grips me like a punch in the gut. I feel it, something burning through me. I turn my head and glance over my shoulder. It’s Trayton’s eyes, piercing through me with an intense stare that makes me feel both vulnerable and desired. He winks at me before deepening the kiss with Jamie. I can’t handle it anymore and tear myself through the door, gasping for air as my heart pounds in my chest.

But then I realize something that sickens me to my core.

I lift my sweater and look down.

My dick is painfully evident under my jeans, rock hard and throbbing, despite the disgust and confusion swirling inside me.

What the fuck was that?

And more importantly, why am I reacting this way to the one guy I hate most?

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Chapter Ten

Trayton

This week has seemed to drag on endlessly, each day feeling longer than the last. I've barely been able to sleep all week out of excitement to discuss my new tattoo and to possibly see the first draft of it. Every morning, I've imagined what it will look like, and finally, today is the day. I've been up since six this morning, and now, as I glance at the clock, it's only eight. Despite being fully showered and ready for the day, I find myself sitting restlessly on the edge of my bed, impatiently waiting for Kal to wake up so I can share my excitement.

But waking him would be a mistake; he's not a morning person, and he'd surely kick my ass if I disturbed his sleep.

There is one person who always seems to be up early.

Brayden.

I glance up at the impressive two-story house in front of me—Brayden's new home with Bohdi. A grin spreads across my face as I jog toward the door and knock quickly a few times. I wait anxiously for a response, and

soon enough, I hear shuffling behind the door. It swings open to reveal a shirtless Bohdi, his dark hair sticking up in all directions.

“Trayton?” he says groggily, rubbing his face with one hand while trying to tame his hair with the other. “Is everything okay?”

“Hey, Mr.—Bohdi,” I say with a chuckle. “Is Brayden around?”

He looks at me with surprise, then shakes his head. “Yes, yes, of course. Come in.” As I enter their spacious living room, I take in my surroundings with admiration. This is my first time visiting Brayden since he returned from London, and, wow, this place is on fire.

Bohdi’s voice echoes through the house, calling out for Brayden. Moments later, Brayden appears in the kitchen, a towel loosely wrapped around his waist and a faint pink tint to his cheeks.

“Oh shit,” I mutter to myself, watching as Bohdi hands me a bottle of water from the fridge. He tosses another one to Brayden, who catches it with ease.

“Trayton, what’s going on? Are you okay?” Brayden asks, with concern etched on his face.

“Yeah, I’m good” I reply nonchalantly, taking a sip of my water. “I just wanted to come say hi.”

Brayden’s eyes shift from me to the clock on the wall. “It’s eight-thirty in the morning, Tray?” He looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Sorry, should have called first,” I say awkwardly, glancing between Brayden and Bohdi.

Bohdi rolls his eyes and leans down to kiss Brayden on the head before whispering not-so-subtly, “I’ll be in the bedroom. Don’t take too long.” He places another kiss on the side of Brayden’s neck.

Brayden flushes scarlet as he watches Bohdi. The other man’s fingers trace over Brayden’s cheeks.

“My favorite,” he mumbles under his breath.

“You two are honestly sickening,” I interject playfully.

“Oh, Trayton, don’t act innocent,” Bohdi teases as he heads toward the stairs. “I saw that video of you at that party last week.”

Brayden joins in on the laughter as I roll my eyes. “What can I say? When a guy crawls to you, you don’t say no. Am I right, sir?” I wink at Bohdi, causing him to throw his head back in laughter.

“I sometimes miss you, Trayton,” Bohdi says with a hint of humor in his voice. “Only sometimes, but not right now. So please hurry up with my man

so I can have him back, okay?" With that, he disappears upstairs, and Brayden is left standing in front of me, still slightly flushed but also wondering why I've shown up so early just to say hi. "All right." I raise my hand. "I'm going to see the first draft of my tattoo today. They told me to be there at ten, so I've been awake since six. Kal was knocked out, and you know how he gets when he's woken up, even when he's not being a hormonal bitch. So, I thought I'd come see you and share my excitement with someone." I plop down on the couch. "Do you have any Pop-Tarts? I need some sugar," I shout over my shoulder.

"Yes," Brayden grumbles as he shuffles to the kitchen.

"Don't be mad at me, Bray, Bray," I sing. "Bros before hoes!"

"I'm not a hoe," Bohdi yells from upstairs.

"A hoe for Brayden," I whisper.

In a few minutes, Brayden comes back, still wearing only a towel and carrying a container.

"I'll get excited once you've seen it," he says, and I stare at him in shock. "Here's your Pop-Tart." He hands me the container. "Take your time walking over there, and enjoy your treat." He points toward the door like I'm a dog being told to go to his pen with his treat.

"Are you seriously kicking me out right now?" I grudgingly stand up and take the container from his hand. "I need new friends." I sigh as I make my way to the front door.

"I'll call you later." Bray slaps me on the back, pushing me out of the doorway too quickly for my liking. As soon as the door closes behind me, I open the container and grab my Pop-Tart, tossing the trash onto the front porch step. As I walk down the pathway to the street, I hear someone calling my name. I turn around to look at the closed front door, but then I glance up at one of the windows and see Bohdi poking his head out.

"What was that 'bros before hoes' thing, Tray?" Bohdi laughs as I raise my hand and flip him off, with my breakfast still hanging out of my mouth.

"Suck it, Stiles," I mumble around my mouthful.

I did manage to take a relaxed stroll, and I ended up only being ten minutes early, which I consider being politely early, not overly eager. Stepping through the door, my eyes immediately land on that damn artwork again, the one that haunts me every time I close my eyes.

With trembling hands, I flash a strained smile at Max behind the counter. My heart is pounding frantically in my chest as I struggle to control my nerves. What if I hate it? Will they have to start all over again, making me wait even longer?

Why did I ever agree to this?

But then my eyes wander over to the art on the wall.

That's why.

"He's waiting for you inside," Max says, a little eager if not a bit cautious. I force a tight-lipped smile and nod before entering through the door behind the counter. As soon as I step inside, my gaze is immediately drawn to the walls adorned with a variety of artwork. I can't help but scan each piece, hoping to find some guidance or reassurance. Suddenly, a loud cough interrupts my thoughts, and I turn to see a table off to my left. My body tenses up.

It can't be.

"Trayton."

My hands curl into fists, every muscle in my body tense, as I stare at Daxton with pure hatred burning in my eyes. His nonchalant sigh only fuels the raging inferno within me, and all I can think about is tearing his head off his shoulders.

"What the fuck, Daxton?" I growl, my voice low and dangerous. My anger is reaching its boiling point, my blood pounding in my veins like a volcanic eruption waiting to happen. "You knew," I state through clenched teeth, not even needing to ask it as a question.

"I did," he admits. He lets out another heavy sigh before standing up, but I can see the fear in his eyes now. "Listen, I knew if I told you about it, you wouldn't want to go through with it."

"You're damn right I wouldn't," I snarl before turning on my heel and making a beeline for the door. To my surprise, Max is still standing there, his expression unreadable. "Sorry, Max. But this"—I jab a finger at Daxton, who now looks deflated by the door, but I couldn't care less. There's no way in hell I'm letting that prick near me with a tattoo gun—"is not happening."

“Have you seen his work?” Max pushes an iPad in my direction, and despite my initial refusal to look, curiosity gets the better of me.

“No, and I don’t give a damn,” I start to say before my eyes land on the animated arm on the screen and my jaw drops at the sight of it. The bottom half of the arm is covered in intricate tattoos, each one holding meaning and significance for me. Multiple pictures show a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the design, leaving me speechless.

It’s perfect.

Even better than what I had envisioned.

A sense of awe and disbelief washes over me as my fingers trace over the three ice hockey pucks, each one bearing numbers. My sixty-nine, Bray’s thirteen, and Kal’s ten from our jerseys—all connected by silver chains held together by a heart charm. On one side of the arm, there’s a hawk with devil horns flying amid blazing flames. A broken chain dangles from its foot.

It’s everything I wanted and more; the visual surpasses anything I could have ever dreamed up. I look up at Daxton, who now stands with his head down.

“How?” I ask him, my voice shaking as emotions flood me. “How did you do this?” He shrugs, still avoiding eye contact, but I can see the slightest hint of pride in his stance. My anger fades away, replaced by a mix of emotions that leaves me feeling emotionally drained yet grateful beyond words.

“I took what you said and drew it.”

I laugh, shaking my head in disbelief. “No, I never described it like this. It’s… it’s.” I can’t even bring myself to give the prick a compliment, but how can I not get this? It’s everything I wanted and more.

“Watching you.” He stops as I glance up at him, frowning. “In training. It helped, I guess.” He shrugs like it’s no big deal. Like he hasn’t just created a fucking masterpiece.

“Were you drawing this while I was training?” I know he’s meant to be doing the project, but I’ve noticed his eyes on me a lot more since the party. I couldn’t work out what it was.

“Yes,” he admits. “When I create art for someone, I observe them in their everyday life. It helps me form a connection”—he pauses—“with the art.” I nod slowly, my eyes returning to the screen, overwhelmed by the depth of what he’s captured.

“How long would this take to do?”

Daxton squints. “Obviously, I can only do weekends, so it will be over three or four Saturdays, four hours a time, and it will be every two to three weeks to give time for the tattoo to heal as we do it.”

“Okay,” I say, making a decision.

Daxton blinks rapidly, and his eyes widen slightly. “Okay?”

“Yes. I want this tattoo. Can we start next Saturday?” My gaze shifts to Max, who has a smug grin on his face, before quickly trying to hide it when he sees my annoyed expression. When I turn back to Daxton, he stares at me with surprise and his mouth slightly open, clearly not expecting me to agree so easily. “U-um, yeah,” he stammers out. I give him a sharp nod and then turn on my heels toward the door. I grab the handle, but Daxton’s voice stops me.

“You don’t want any changes? Most people want some adjustments made. I can send you the design so you can take a closer look and let me know if anything needs to be changed,” he rushes to say.

I turn sideways, but my eyes drift to the art on the wall for a moment and then to the iPad screen on the counter, and finally back to Daxton. “No,” I confirm. “It’s perfect just the way it is.”

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Chapter Eleven

Daxton

The day has been a rollercoaster of emotions. Trayton's decision to get the tattoo left me in shock. I had expected a fight, maybe even some punches thrown. I was convinced that he would lose his mind. And for a moment, it seemed like he might when he raged and cursed. But then Max placed the tablet in front of him, and everything changed. As soon as Trayton saw the design I had created, his anger dissolved, and he couldn't take his eyes off it. It was my first official sleeve design, or half-sleeve rather, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride at that moment. Trayton had provided detailed notes for the tattoo and had ultimately decided on just getting the half-sleeve done for now.

He mentioned in his notes what he wanted, and I created that, but watching him this week, watching him in his element, with Kal and Brayden, I drew without even thinking. It just came to me, and that's what I mean when I say I need a connection with what I'm drawing. Although I don't have a connection with Trayton, I had a visual connection with what he wanted. It also helps that, as much as I hate to even think about it, I know Trayton better than he even knows.

And this week made me realize that.

I fucking hated it.

Today felt like torture, watching every emotion flicker across his face as he looked at that damn iPad screen. The warmth that spread through me at

the sight of him pleased with my work was both exhilarating and infuriating. I despise how my heart jumped at the sight of those piercing green, blue, and a tiny bit of yellow eyes of his as they met mine.

And when he said he wanted me to tattoo him, my entire body erupted in goose bumps.

It's been too long since I've been with anyone, and Trayton is far from unattractive. Maybe it's just my primal instincts kicking in after being surrounded by alpha males all week. That has to be it. That has to be why I can't get his goddamn face out of my head since he walked out of the shop.

I'm not going back down this road again.

I can't.

I reach for my sketch pad, desperately trying to distract myself from thoughts of him. My fingers wrap tightly around the worn fabric of my backpack as I lift it off the floor and retrieve my pad, laying it down roughly on my bed.

With fierce determination, I begin to sketch, letting my pencil move smoothly over the paper, creating lines and shapes that take on a life of their own. I pour all my emotions into the drawing, using every color in my stash to bring it to life.

Suddenly, Cope's voice breaks through my concentration, and I jump, startled out of my thoughts. He raises an eyebrow at me, with a sly smirk playing on his lips.

"Earth to Daxton," he says, waving a hand in front of my face.

"Sorry," I mumble, dropping the green pencil in my hand. "I was just lost in thought."

Cope's gaze shifts to my sketch pad, and I quickly close it, not wanting anyone to see my work before it's finished. Showing unfinished pieces always leaves room for criticism and nitpicking.

"What were you working on?" Cope juts his chin at the pad.

"Nothing, just keeping my hands busy," I reply.

"That's how you keep your hands busy?" Cope raises his eyebrows at me.

I frown at him in confusion. “How else would I?”

Cope’s instant teasing smirk makes me feel like I’m finding my own dick for the first time again. I can feel heat rising in my cheeks instantly, and I hate how easily I blush.

“Oh, Daxton.” Cope laughs and then proceeds to throw his head back, laughing more. I sit there feeling like the absolute dick I am. Pun *not* intended. “I’m joking, Dax,” he says, wiping tears from his eyes. “But seriously, I’ve heard how talented those hands of yours are.”

I raise an eyebrow at him, trying to decipher if there’s a hidden meaning behind his words. Judging by his smirk, there probably is.

“Just came from seeing Tray,” he confirms.

Ah, now it makes sense.

“Yeah,” I reply with a grimace, waiting for Cope to call me out for not telling him about my work with Tray’s tattoo.

“You did good.” He laughs. “Man, he was raging.” Cope shakes his head, still chuckling. “He’s been going on and on about this tattoo for months, and then it turns out the guy he hates most is the one who designed it.” Cope’s laughter grows louder, and I can’t help but join in. “It’s pure brilliance.”

“I don’t think he agrees with that,” I mumble.

Cope’s eyes widen, adding to the anxious butterflies in my stomach. “Oh, he definitely doesn’t,” he says with a slight softening of his expression. “But he can’t wait for you to get started on it.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment as I shuffle on my bed, avoiding eye contact with Cope. His words make me feel self-conscious, and I wish he’d stop talking so I can regain control over my blushing. Suddenly, a thought that has been nagging at the back of my mind pops up, and I tip my chin up to Cope.

“Why are you being nice to me?” I blurt out as I fiddle with the hem of my shirt, feeling flustered and awkward.

Cope tilts his head to the side, raising one eyebrow in curiosity. “Why wouldn’t I be?” he responds, genuinely confused.

“Because of Trayton,” I clarify.

Cope shrugs nonchalantly. “I’m not Trayton, am I?”

“No,” I confirm.

He stretches his arms above his head and bends from side to side. “Look.” He drops his arms and continues, “Just because Trayton has some

issue with you doesn't mean everyone does. You're not a hated person, Dax," he says softly, trying to reassure me. "I have no reason to hate you, so why would I just because my friend does? Especially when he won't even tell me what your supposed wrongdoing is and just spews some bullshit about you selling drugs. He tried getting the team to hate you, but they all just laughed. It's all nonsense."

My body tenses at the mention of drugs. "I don't anymore," I quickly interject.

Cope raises his hand in defense. "I know. I know," he urges. "What happened wasn't your fault, Dax." His words hit me hard, causing a lump to form in my throat. He doesn't need to say what he means; we both know that it's about Bex. It's something that haunts me every day and something I blame myself for. "Just because you come from a shitty family doesn't make you a bad person." Cope smiles warmly at me. "Brayden is living proof of that, and so are you."

I nod, feeling grateful for his words. "Thanks," I say sincerely. It's a relief to know that not everyone blames me for everything my family has done.

"Speaking of Trayton," Cope starts to say before I quickly cut him off.

"Let's not," I say tensely.

A mischievous glint appears in Cope's eyes as he teasingly points out, "I saw you blush earlier." Cope completely ignores me and begins talking. "He was like, 'Oh my god, have you seen how perfectly he captured what I wanted? It's incredible. It's going to look amazing,'" Cope continues, causing me to abruptly stand and head to the bathroom. I just want him to stop talking.

"Dax." Cope's teasing voice follows me.

"Just taking a shower," I quickly reply as I grab the handle.

"Daxtonnn." He drags out my name playfully. "Look at me."

"Piss off," I mumble under my breath, slamming the door. I stand in front of the mirror and stare at my flushed cheeks, just wishing the guy wouldn't have this effect on me.

"Not again, Dax. Not again."

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Chapter Twelve

Trayton

My eyes lock onto the puck, gliding alongside my stick as I tear up the ice with a burst of speed. The cold air bites at my cheeks, but my focus remains unbroken. I keep my gaze down, tracking the puck's every move, but I steal quick glances to my left, sensing Cope closing in on me. He's fast, but not fast enough. They never are.

A triumphant grin spreads beneath my helmet as I fake left, then right, my skates carving sharp turns into the ice. Snowy shards spray into Cope's path as I blaze past him with a burst of acceleration. I draw my stick back, muscles coiling in anticipation, ready to unleash a powerful slap shot. Just as I'm about to strike, a force slams into me from the side, driving me into the boards.

"Fuck," I mutter through gritted teeth as I crash into the side. The impact reverberates through my body—not as hard as it could have been, but enough to rattle me. I catch a glimpse of Kal skating by with a smirk. The puck deftly controlled on his stick as he races down to the other end of the rink.

Determination flares within me, and I clench my jaw, propelling myself back up the ice with renewed energy. The chill of the rink fades into the background as my focus narrows. I'm not giving up that puck without a fight.

Kal speeds down the rink, but I'm hot on his heels. I see an opening and push myself harder, my skates cutting sharp lines into the ice. Kal's got skill, so fucking much of it. But I have the speed.

As I'm closing in, I catch Daxton's eye on the sidelines. His presence annoys me, a distraction I don't need, but I force myself to ignore it. Just as Kal's about to take his shot, I intercept him with a perfectly timed body check. He loses balance, and the puck slips away. I swiftly scoop it up and head back toward their goal, hearing my friends cheer and shout. It's a friendly competition, but the adrenaline rush is real. We're always told to treat it like a real game. When in training, our team is our competition. The minute training is over. We're a team. It's something Coach drummed into us and made it clear that us being a team is just as important, but we need the practice. Not many coaches agree with this approach, but that's Denny.

He's different. And we all like it. He's a good coach.

With the net in my sights, I sneak a glance to my side—but Cope is there too. When did he get so fast? Keeping my focus, I pull my stick back and watch it slice cleanly between Jennings's legs.

I raise my helmet and speed toward Kal, doing a silly dance around him because I know how much he absolutely loves it. *Not*. He grunts and gives me a shove, trying to knock me over, but I manage to stay on my feet as always. Brayden skates over, breathless. "It's not normal how fast you are, Tray. I couldn't even keep up with you," he says.

"It's a tough life being a god." I shrug sarcastically. As I turn on my skates in a circle again, my eyes catch on to Daxton, whose smile drops, and his eyes dart away from mine. Why the fuck is he looking at me and smiling? I skid to a stop on my skates, sending small ice shavings up Brayden's leg. I grit my jaw, staring at Daxton, waiting to see if he looks at me again, but he doesn't. He keeps his head down and then gets his phone out. He frowns down at his phone for a moment, rubbing his hand over his face. Once. Twice. Then he runs his hands through his hair. He looks up, but he's not looking at me. Or is he? His eyes look like they are looking in twenty different places at once.

It's chaotic.

It's panic.

It's pure fucking fear.

I huff and look away at Brayden and Kal, who stare at me, move their focus to Daxton, and then back to me.

“What?” I frown, crossing my arms. Brayden glances at Kal, and Kal gazes back at Brayden. Kal raises his eyebrows like they’re talking through a secret sign language only they know. “What?” I spew again. They both look at me. Kal’s lips twitch as Brayden rubs his hand over his mouth, clearly trying to hide his smirk.

He failed miserably.

“Nothing,” they both say in unison. Ugh, I hate when they do this.

They skate off the ice, and I shake my head, following them. I’m the last to walk through the gate, ready to head back to the lockers. Because I clearly like to see Daxton in distress, I turn my head, hoping I’ll see that fear in his eyes again, but I don’t.

He’s not there.

But his sketch pad is. I turn my head to check if anyone’s around, but everyone’s gone into the lockers already. I trudge along the seats to where Daxton was sitting and glance down at the sketch pad, which is closed. I look around the rink. He’s not here, so I pick up the sketch pad and open the first page.

Shit.

It’s amazing. Fuck, why does he have to be so good at drawing? I flick to the next page, and then I frown. It’s a sketch of me, Kal, and Brayden. We’re all laughing.

We look so fucking happy.

The image is so perfect that it’s as if we’re going to come alive on the page.

How does he fucking do this? I flick to the next, and I suck in a sharp breath. It’s me.

The next one.

Me.

The next.

Me.

What the fuck? I hear a noise behind me and quickly shove the sketch pad up my jersey, turning toward the locker room.

What the fuck is this guy doing?

That evening, I steal a quick glance at Kal. He’s got his back to me, probably scowling at his phone as if it’s personally offended him. I swear, every night, he fixes himself on that phone. It’s sometimes hard to even get a conversation out of him. I quietly reach down between my bed and the wall, fingers searching for Daxton’s sketch pad I snagged earlier. My heart pounds in my chest as I keep checking to make sure Kal isn’t sneaking a peek over his shoulder. As silently as possible, I open it to the first page. There it is—the sketch of me, Kal, and Brayden on the ice at the rink during hockey practice. The fluorescent lights overhead are captured in soft shading, casting a warm glow over the scene. Our smiles are so real that they practically jump off the page. Kal’s grin is wide, his helmet slightly askew, eyes crinkling at the corners, the way they do when he’s genuinely into the moment. Brayden is mid-laugh, his mouth open in a carefree chuckle, stick propped on his shoulder like he doesn’t have a worry in the world. And me—I look alive, eyes shining, a big smile spread across my face.

The crisp lines of the rink barriers frame us, and the smooth surface of the ice is detailed with just the right amount of texture, showing the carved lines from our skates. You can almost feel the cold air and hear the echo of our laughter bouncing off the arena walls. Daxton captured everything—the friendship, the thrill of the game, the unspoken bond between us.

I want to hate it so badly, just like I did when I saw my tattoo.

But I can’t

He’s too fucking good.

God, I hate him.

I flip to the next one, and it’s me frowning down in concentration at the puck in front of me. I scan every detail of the photo, not able to take my eyes off it. It’s as if the only thing in the world that exists is that puck in front of me. I flick to the next one, and it’s me, body checking Kal when we were having our friendly rivalry, but it’s not finished. Maybe that’s when he left.

Why did he leave? Why did he look scared?

Why do I even fucking care?

I don’t. I’m just curious, I guess. I’ve always been curious.

I flick to the next page, waiting to see if he’s sketched anything or anyone else, but the next one isn’t anything to do with hockey. It’s a blue lake that ends with tall green trees. The colors blend, but in the middle of the image and behind the trees, bright light streams through the gaps. Casting a glow across the water. I squint my eyes to look at the writing in the corner. “Mystic Tealglow.”

It’s another version of the one at the shop. It looks almost the same, but the glow is from a different angle this time. It has to be the sun, right?

I get why he loves this picture, but to draw it again? He must really love it.

I flip to the next page, but there’s nothing. I flip through the rest of the pages, but that’s it. I’m drawn to the picture of the lake and the trees. I want to look at it again so turn back and stare at it. It bugs me how familiar it is, like I’ve seen this exact image before.

Does he copy art? I huff a laugh. It wouldn’t surprise me if he did. I quickly snap my gaze to Kal to make sure he didn’t turn around, but it looks as though he’s put his phone down now.

I trace the ripples of the waves with my finger and then move up to the lifelike trees. I stare straight at the glow peeking through the branches.

Why have I seen this?

I tear the page out of the sketchbook and place the book back down beside my bed. I lay my head down, keeping my back to Kal, and continue to stare at the picture. It feels so real that I swear when I close my eyes, I can hear the waves crashing together.

I keep my eyes closed and allow sleep to take me.

That night, I dream of the waves, the trees, and that glow.

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Chapter Thirteen

Daxton

This week has felt like a journey through hell. All I wanted was to hide away in my room for the weekend and ignore the world, but of course, that wasn't an option. The chaos and drama of the past week have consumed me, causing me to forget that today is the start of Trayton's tattoo. It may seem insignificant to some, but for me, it's a big deal. It's my first time tattooing someone, and wouldn't you know it, it has to be my archenemy.

It's funny how life works sometimes.

It's really not that funny, actually.

As I sit in the shop, checking over my preparations for what feels like the hundredth time, I can't help but feel anxious. I have all the necessary supplies laid out in front of me—ink, wipes, and the tattoo machine—yet I can't shake this feeling of doubt and unease. One more check won't hurt though.

Just as I finish going over everything once again, the bell rings from the front of the shop. Max already texted me, saying he'd be running late, so I opened up on my own this morning. Walking through to the front of the shop, I see Trayton standing there, his gaze fixed upon one of my art pieces hanging on the wall. I remember when Max first saw that piece and how impressed he was with it. It was at that moment that he agreed to let me work here and later asked if we could display it in the shop. I don't think

I've ever said yes so quickly before. Every time I come into this shop and see that painting hanging on the wall, it brings a smile to my face despite myself. And hearing Max tell me what Trayton said when he first saw it… well, that just made it even better.

He's it.

When Max gave me Trayton's name as my first client, my stomach dropped. I was excited to finally have someone to tattoo, but deep down, I knew Trayton wouldn't agree to it. However, when I read through the notes he provided for his tattoo design, I knew I could do it. I was determined to create something that would make him struggle to say no. Even though I had expected him to reject me, there was a part of me that wanted to impress him. To make him feel something other than hate toward me, even if it was just for a moment.

Let's not get it twisted though—I hate Trayton. I hate the things he's said and done to me, both physically and verbally. But there's something satisfying about proving people wrong, especially those who see you as nothing more than scum. They think you're worthless, that you'll never amount to anything. So when given the chance, I take great pleasure in proving them all wrong. Even if it means impressing someone I despise.

Trayton clears his throat, and his piercing gaze meets mine. Our hatred for each other is palpable in the air, but at this point, what else is new?

Each time I see him, Trayton's presence fills me with fear and anger. He still thinks he can intimidate me like he did last year, but I won't let him. As he approaches, I resist the urge to scowl or make a snide comment. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of knowing he gets to me. But despite hating his actions, I can't deny that Trayton is ridiculously good-looking.

His basketball shorts hang low on his hips, showing off his toned muscles and rippled eight-pack in a tight white tank top. The backward cap, with tufts of brown hair sticking out at the sides, tops off his effortlessly cool and sexy look. Meanwhile, I feel like an outcast sitting here looking at him, trying not to show how much he affects me. It's frustrating and infuriating all at once. As he gruffly asks where I want him, I try to fight the urge to roll my eyes. I lose that battle. But when he hovers over me, it's like a weight pressing down on my shoulders. Trying to maintain some semblance of control, I point to the chair next to me without looking up at him.

I focus on my work, trying not to let Trayton's presence distract me. But his piercing gaze follows my every move as I carefully trace the design onto

paper. “Don’t screw this up, Rivers,” he warns in a tense voice.

I bite back a retort and continue working, trying to ignore the tension between us. It’s awkward and uncomfortable, but somehow also exhilarating. This is my chance to prove myself and show that I’m not just some Quiet Boy who’ll back down from bullies.

“No pressure,” I mutter under my breath, mentally kicking myself for even engaging in conversation with him. He’s made it perfectly clear that he wants nothing to do with me. “Before we start, were you happy with all the placements?” I ask, trying to remain professional.

“If I wasn’t, I would have said something,” he fires back.

God, this guy is unbearable.

Without another word, I carefully place the tracing paper on the front of his arm and smooth it down so it sticks fully. I feel his eyes boring into me as he watches my every move. “Getting your first tattoo is always exciting,” I grumble, then inwardly cringe at my own words. Stop making fucking small talk with him.

“Who said anything about this being my first tattoo?” Trayton snaps, breaking my train of thought. “You don’t know me, Quiet Boy. You don’t know what I have or haven’t done.” His biting words anger and frustrate me, but I take a deep breath and clench my jaw. His words continue to linger in my mind, reminding me that I don’t really know this arrogant guy who has caused me so much pain. I knew the boy he once was. Not this version. Yet, here I am, helping him achieve something that will stay with him forever. It’s a strange and conflicting feeling, but for now, I push it aside and focus on getting the job done.

When I was at the game last week, I watched Trayton, Kal, and Brayden bantering back and forth after a grueling training session where Trayton played fucking amazingly, as much as I hate to even think it. He was basking in the glory, and I just had to smile. Memories of me and Bex flooded my mind while I watched them. When the days were bad, they were horrendous for us, but when they were good, they were fucking incredible. It was rare for me and Bex not to have constant chaos, whether it was someone not paying us after ticking from us the night before or my dad starting some shit with someone who me and Bex then had to go and deal with. At other times, my dad would have one of his turns and use me as a punching bag, and Bex would automatically jump in and also become a target. Then there were the days when Bex would get so high that he

couldn't even lift his head, let alone talk to me. Those moments were a stark contrast to the times when we felt invincible, like nothing could touch us. The highs were euphoric, but the lows were a brutal reminder of the reality we lived in.

On the good days, we lived like there was no tomorrow. Even if it was just chilling in my room, playing video games, or Bex watching me as I sketched. Those were our golden moments, our sanctuaries from the chaos that was always just a breath away. I miss those days. I miss him so much.

Of course, in that fleeting second when I was lost in the memory and actually smiling, Trayton's eyes just had to find mine across the ice. My face fell instantly, and I quickly looked away, but not fast enough to miss the flicker of anger in his gaze.

As if on cue, my phone started ringing. First, it was my dad, and then Marley called moments later. The odd text and voicemail hadn't prepared me for this onslaught, making me feel more uneasy. I haven't been back to the trailer since moving into my dorm, and I hate to admit it, but the thought of facing him or Marley terrifies me. The memories of the turmoil, the constant tension, and the fear—it's all too overwhelming. My phone kept ringing relentlessly. Each shrill tone sent a jolt of dread through my body, gnawing at my insides. I couldn't bring myself to answer it. I just stared at the screen, my eyes fixated on the growing list of missed calls, each one a silent scream for attention. The anxiety clawed at my belly, a hot flush washing over me repeatedly, like waves of panic crashing against a fragile shore.

My hands turned clammy; my breaths came in ragged, uneven gasps. The familiar grip of a panic attack tightened around my chest. Desperation seized me, and I bolted. I ran, I fucking ran to the gym, seeking refuge in the locker room toilets. I locked myself in and crumpled to the floor, the cold, dirty tiles pressing against my skin. I laid there, wishing that it was a heart attack and not just another panic attack.

I tried to steady my breathing, to find a trace of control, but it was useless. The panic consumed me. At that moment, I believed it was the end for me. And the tragic part was, I wasn't sad. I felt an eerie calmness, a morbid sense of peace. It was then that I realized the panic attack subsided because I had accepted the thought of dying.

And I was okay with that.

That night, I walked for what felt like an eternity; the cool air was freeing. I went to see Bex. He always made it better. I hadn't felt those dark thoughts since losing Bexley. But my dad and Marley—they dredged it all up. The life I was desperately trying to escape yet feared I never truly would. The memories, the fears—they were inescapable shadows lurking at the edges of my mind.

"What is wrong with you?" Trayton's voice slices through my spiraling thoughts, yanking me back to reality. My breath comes in ragged gasps, sweat trickles down my temples, and my hands are clammy as they hover over the stencil that stubbornly clings to his arm.

"No-nothing," I stammer, my voice barely a whisper. I clear my throat, trying to steady myself. Carefully, I peel back the stencil, relieved to see the ink hasn't smudged.

"I mean it, Rivers. fuck this up, and you'll regret it," Trayton growls, his eyes boring into mine with a menacing intensity.

I need a moment, or I'll ruin everything. Without a word, I stand and cross to the sink, my legs feeling like lead. I gulp down a glass of water, the cool liquid soothing my dry throat. Splashing water on my face, I take a few deep breaths, willing myself to calm down. I turn on my heels and march back to Trayton, determination coursing through my veins.

I don't hesitate. I change my gloves, slipping on a fresh pair with practiced precision. Sitting down, I pick up the tattoo machine, and the instant the buzzing fills the air, my mind goes blissfully silent. The outline of the image on Trayton's arm begins to take shape, each line bringing it to life. A smile tugs at my lips.

I'm home. Here, in the art, in the hum of the tattoo machine.

I'm home, I repeat to myself, feeling a sense of peace wash over me.

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Chapter Fourteen

Trayton

My eyes don't stray from the tattoo gun, its needle piercing into my skin with relentless precision. Every now and then, I flick my gaze to Daxton. I don't know what the fuck just happened, but he froze. For minutes, I just sat there staring at him because it was the exact same expression he wore the other day. Panic and fear.

I traced the sweat dripping down his forehead, his eyes vacant like a void. His accelerated breaths, the dramatic rise and fall of his chest. The way his hand pressed hard into my arm. He was here, in this room, with me. But he wasn't. He was somewhere else, and I can't lie, I nearly got up off this chair and ran out of here.

I don't need some fucked-up druggy tattooing me and messing it all up. Why did I stay? Who the fuck knows? I kept telling myself he drew that design freehand. All he has to do is trace it. Easy peasy, right? It's not easy peasy, though, is it? Otherwise, everyone would be tattooing.

And that's not the reason I stayed, is it? No. As much as I hate to admit it, a teeny tiny part of me wanted to make sure he was okay. I would never admit to those words out loud. Ever. But something about his eyes—they looked sad, lost even.

Maybe I just craved to see him sad. That would make sense. I shuffle slightly, the soreness seeping into my skin as he shades over one particular bit. I glance at where he's working. Does he really need to go over it so many times? "Will you sit still," Daxton deadpans, clearly annoyed.

“I can’t get comfortable,” I lie. Ain’t no way I’m admitting it’s sore. I’m a six-foot-two, two-hundred-pound hockey player. I can handle a fucking tattoo.

“Sure it’s that,” he sarcastically replies, and I hiss through my teeth as I swear he digs that fucking needle into my arm more than necessary. His eyes flash up to mine, and a small smirk tips the side of his lips. Fucking prick.

I stop looking at his hand and that tattoo gun, allowing my eyes to trace over the rest of the room. It’s a big room with four other tattoo stations set up. Each one has pictures up on billboards showcasing tattoos I’m assuming each artist has done. I turn my head sideways to see if Daxton has a billboard, and he does, but instead of tattoo images, he has sketches he’s done. One is my tattoo. God, it’s fucking perfect. That’s when I spot another billboard next to Daxton’s but still in his corner. It’s pictures of piercings. And it’s actual people in this one. Lip piercings, eyebrows, tongues—so many. And then a sign above that says “I pierce too.”

“You do piercings?” I blurt out before I can think better of it because do I really care? No. I’m just intrigued, I guess, and bored.

“Yup,” he states. I turn my head to look at him, his brows furrowed in pure concentration as he shades away. His top teeth bite down on his lip ring—a habit I’ve noticed he’s kept up the entire time since he started tattooing. For some reason unknown to me, I seize the moment to analyze him. I don’t think I’ve ever looked at him this closely before.

It’s annoying as hell because I’m already jealous of his mile-long, jet-black eyelashes. He must get them tinted; no one’s lashes are that black. But then I notice his hair. It’s just as black as his eyelashes, trimmed sharply on the sides, but a wild mat of curls on top. A few of them dangle over his forehead, suspended in midair as he leans closer to my arm. A dust of dark freckles sits atop his small nose, which stands out against his pale skin.

“Are you wearing mascara?” I ask.

Daxton’s lips curl up on one side before his eyes shift, pinning me in place. He doesn’t move a muscle; only his eyes move, and that’s when I truly see them.

So green.

Not just any green—like vibrant emeralds ablaze with an inner fire.

An intense, searing green that seems to pierce right through me.

Ablaze with inner fire? What is wrong with me?

“No,” he states flatly, his smile fading as he immerses himself back into his work.

He’s bullshitting; I’m sure of it.

“Did you pierce your lip?” I question as he pulls it between his teeth again. Daxton sighs, dipping the tattoo gun into the ink before locking eyes with me once more.

“Yes.”

This infuriates me. Why am I asking him questions? Why am I bothering to talk to him? I don’t want to ask him any more questions, but I can’t control how the route from my brain to my mouth malfunctions.

I can’t hold back my curiosity any longer and let loose the question, “Do you only have your lip pierced?” I immediately regret asking. It doesn’t matter what piercings he has. Why do I even care? My brain betrays me again.

“No, I have a few more,” he replies with no further explanation. But that’s not enough for me; I want to know about every piercing he has. I don’t want the information spoon-fed to me; I want the whole fucking meal at once.

“Where?” I push, unable to control my need to know.

“Stop clenching,” he says, still focused on my arm.

Confused, I furrow my brows and ask, “What?”

“Your fist, stop clenching it.”

Suddenly, his fingers dig into my palm, and chills run down my body. Daxton has taken hold of my hand, prying open my fingers.

My eyes lock with his, and he looks away quickly, as if he wasn’t just staring at me. “Your veins are bulging; it will hurt more,” he explains in a hushed tone before picking up the tattoo gun again.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to ignore the tingling sensation in my hand.

I should have accepted that blowjob last night. I’m starved for attention, and now Daxton Rivers has set my body ablaze like a brightly lit ice hockey rink. This is just fucking great.

After that intense moment, my brain reminds me not to speak. I’m grateful for this reminder because who knows what I would have let slip in my state of shock?

Daxton continues wiping the same spot on my arm, which keeps bleeding for some reason. It's painful, but I don't want to give him another chance to touch me by clenching my fists again.

"Done," he announces, cracking his neck. "Don't move." He holds onto my arm as if to make sure I follow his instructions. I can't help but glance at his hand wrapped around my upper arm. Why is my stomach flipping? Why do I have goose bumps all over my arms? It's just a hand. I hate it here.

He returns with plastic wrap and takes out his phone.

"Can I?" he asks, waving his hand at me, and I assume he wants to take pictures. I nod, sitting up to get a better look at it.

It's perfect. It's mainly just the outline at the moment. There are some bits shaded, but even the outline is everything.

I stare at it, mesmerized by the intricate lines and subtle shading. It's like Daxton has somehow captured a piece of my soul and etched it onto my skin.

"It's…" I start, but words fail me.

"Yeah," Daxton says softly, a hint of pride in his voice. "It came out well."

He snaps a few photos, the flash momentarily blinding me. I blink rapidly, trying to clear the spots from my vision. When I can see again, I find Daxton studying me with an intensity that makes my breath catch.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious.

He shakes his head slightly as if coming out of a trance. "Nothing. Just thinking about the next session."

Right. The next session. Because this isn't over. I'll be back here, in this chair, with Daxton's hands on my skin again. The thought sends a shiver down my spine that I desperately try to suppress.

"So, three weeks?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

Daxton starts wrapping my arm in plastic wrap, his fingers brushing against my skin with each pass. "Yeah, that should be enough time. It needs to heal a little first. Then we can do more outlining and shading on the next session."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. The air feels thick, charged with something I can't quite name. Or maybe I just don't want to name it.

"Take care of it," Daxton says as he finishes wrapping my arm. "No soaking in water for the first couple of weeks. Use the aftercare lotion I'll give you. And if you have any problems, call me."

He hands me a business card with his number on it. Our fingers brush as I take it from him, and I tense.

I really needed that fucking blowjob last night.

“Cool.” I sharply nod as I move around him and more or less run toward the door. My tattoo, the one I haven’t stopped going on about? Yeah, long forgotten.

All I know is I need to get out of here. I despise the way my body is acting right now. As soon as the door closes behind me, I suck in fresh air and roll my head back, looking up at the sky. I close my eyes and then take my phone out of my pocket, searching up one of my many hook-up's.

Me:

Get to my dorm ASAP. I got an emergency.

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Chapter Fifteen

Daxton

I can't stop the infectious grin that stretches across my face as I flick through the pictures on my phone for the tenth time since I've been back in my dorm room. After Trayton more or less bolted out of the shop after throwing some cash at me, I tidied up and headed out front where Max was chilling. Apparently, Trayton had exited so fast he didn't even notice Max manning the counter. I had planned to suggest to Trayton that he show Max, but clearly, he had other plans. I ended up showing Max the photos, and even though it's mainly just an outline at this stage, I couldn't stop beaming with pride. Max even mentioned that he thinks it's going to be one of the best sleeves ever done at the studio. Compliments are something I've rarely received in life, so I was mortified by the way my cheeks burned with embarrassment when he said that.

"I take it the tattoo went well," Cope observes, walking out from the bathroom. He returned from the gym about half an hour ago and headed straight for a shower, so I haven't had the opportunity to tell him about it yet.

"Really good," I reply with a broad grin. I can feel Cope's eyes fixed on me, and I glance up to meet his gaze as steam billows from the bathroom, swirling around him as he stands there with just a towel wrapped around his waist. "What?" I ask, my smile faltering slightly. His smirk is laden with an expression I can't quite decipher.

“Nothing,” he says, biting his cheek as if trying to prevent the grin from spreading further. He then saunters over to his bed, leaving me confused. I narrow my eyes at him, suspicion creeping in. “Seriously, what’s that look for?”

Cope shrugs, but the smirk doesn’t leave his face. “It’s just nice seeing you… smile, I guess.”

I feel my cheeks heat up again, and I turn my attention back to my phone, scrolling through the pictures once more. “It’s a big deal, okay? This tattoo means a lot to me. I mean… designing the tattoo means a lot,” I correct.

“Oh, I’m sure it does,” Cope says, his voice filled with something that sounds dangerously close to knowing. “And I’m sure the person receiving it had nothing to do with that grin, right?”

My head snaps up, and I meet Cope’s gaze. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He holds up his hands in mock surrender, the towel slipping slightly. “Nothing, nothing at all. Just an”—he waves his hand in the air like he’s trying to find the right words—“observation.”

I roll my eyes, trying to play it cool despite the heat creeping up my neck. “You’re reading way too much into this, Cope. It’s just a tattoo design.”

“Uh-huh,” he replies, clearly unconvinced. He flops onto his bed, arms behind his head, still wearing that infuriating smirk. “And I’m sure you put this much effort into all your drawings and designs, right?”

I open my mouth to respond, but nothing comes out. He’s not entirely wrong. I’ve been obsessing over this particular design for weeks, tweaking every little detail until it was perfect. But it’s not because of who it’s for. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

“Look,” I say, attempting to regain some composure. “It’s my first tattoo. It’s a big deal for me. That’s all.”

Cope seems to let it go, but I still catch that smug grin lingering on his lips. “How was your archenemy today, then? Do I need to have words?”

“Words?” I question.

“Yeah, was he rude to you?” he asks, speaking so nonchalantly it almost sounds like he would truly march up to Trayton and confront him if he caused me any trouble. Cope has been friends with Trayton for years; why would he prioritize me over Trayton?

“And what if he was?” I probe, curious to see his reaction.

“Then I’ll beat his ass on and off the ice,” he declares.

I tilt my head, scrutinizing Cope's expression to detect any hint of sarcasm. But he simply furrows his brows and mirrors my gesture, tilting his head back at me. It's as if he can sense the turmoil his words have stirred within me. His eyes soften, and he shifts his position, sitting up straighter as his towel slips dangerously low, prompting me to avert my gaze rapidly.

"I know it's hard for you to believe, but people really don't hate you, Dax," he says, his voice gentle. I fixate on my fingers, tugging at the loose skin around my nails, a nervous habit I can't shake, one that had me nibbling all morning.

"I know not everyone does," I acknowledge quietly. "Just a few," I finish, my voice barely above a whisper.

"No, just Trayton, and even then, I'm not convinced," he counters. So much for avoiding his gaze; my head swivels to face him so quickly I half expect to hear a crack.

"Not convinced?" I repeat in amazement, my voice rising. "How much convincing do you need to know that guy thinks of me as nothing more than dirt on his shoe?" I laugh bitterly. "The feeling's mutual too," I agree, lifting my chin defiantly. I don't care that Cope is Trayton's friend. I want him to understand the depth of my resentment. "Scum, remember?"

Cope chuckles, that smirk making its usual appearance in the last few minutes. "Sewer, remember?" He laughs. "Solid comeback, by the way. A few of the boys were talking about that for a week."

"Yeah, well, he needs to know I'm not the same person I was last year; he's not going to bully me the way he used to."

"Good for you. But even though I don't know you that well, I think I see you already, Dax. You're not a horrible person. I can tell you're not into all this drama with Trayton and don't enjoy throwing insults around," Cope says, with his arms crossed. I shrug, trying to look unaffected. It's true—I'd do anything for a peaceful life where Trayton just walked by without a word, maybe a nod at most. But that's not going to happen because he's holding on to a misunderstanding that's blown out of proportion. I made a promise to Bex to keep that secret locked away, and there's no way I'm explaining things to Trayton or even Cope, not when it would mean betraying the one person who stood by me when everything went dark.

"It is what it is," I reply, my voice flat.

“Mmm, well, you should step out of this room and see how many people actually like you. Come to the bar with us?” Cope suggests, a hint of a friendly smile on his lips.

“When?” I ask, curious.

Cope picks up his phone from the nightstand, the screen casting a soft glow on his face. “In about an hour. We’re heading to Brewtap, but if you don’t have ID, I can tell them to meet us at Pythons. Tray’s brother can get you in.”

“Brother?” I frown, confusion knitting my brows. Since when did Trayton have a brother?

Cope nods, “Yeah, half bro, they’re not exactly close, but he helps Tray out by letting people in without IDs. He’s on security there.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” I say, the new information settling in.

“So, do you have ID?” Cope asks, raising an eyebrow.

I relax my shoulders and roll my eyes. “Do you really have to ask? Me and Bex spent most of our time in bars.” The words slip out before I can catch them. I usually avoid talking about the past with Bex, worried about how people might judge me. But when I look at Cope, he doesn’t even flinch.

“Well then, get ready,” he says with a wide grin, dropping his towel casually. I quickly avert my gaze to the wall, my cheeks flushing. What is it with hockey guys always being so casual about nudity?

“I can’t come,” I say, my eyes stubbornly fixed on the wall. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cope turn to face me.

“Trayton won’t cause trouble; I’ll make sure of it,” he assures me, his voice firm and reassuring.

“It’s not that,” I murmur defensively, though I know it really isn’t. Despite my reluctance to spend an evening in a bar with Trayton, there’s something comforting about Cope’s determined effort to include me. After years of feeling invisible, it’s a welcome surprise to have someone want to be around me—something I haven’t experienced since Bex, the one person who always made me feel seen. I clear my throat and nervously scratch the back of my neck as I fumble for words. “I… erm…” I begin, my voice faltering under the weight of the moment. “Have a date,” I finally reveal. A surge of heat rushes through my body, and I feel my cheeks ignite under the intense gaze of Cope, who’s caught a glimpse of my flushed face from the corner of his eye. I make a mental note to search for some kind of cosmetic

fix—maybe face injections—to keep my skin from turning beet red; it's starting to feel downright ridiculous.

Before I can lose myself in anxious thoughts, Cope ambles into view. He strides over to my bed, casually throwing himself onto its end. His eyes sparkle like mischievous sequins, and his grin widens in a way that instantly melts away some of my tension. "Do tell," he urges, leaning forward so that his gaze locks onto mine, pushing me to share details I'm not entirely ready to admit.

"Just a date," I reply, trying to sound nonchalant.

But Cope isn't one to let simple answers go unchallenged. He fires off questions like a rapid volley: "Name, age, favorite hockey team?" His tone wavers between genuine curiosity and playful tease. When I hesitate, he interjects with a theatrically smug, "It best be Devil Hawks," before teasingly correcting himself with a wink. "Oh, wait—does he go to Hawksview?" His banter leaves me momentarily stunned, my eyes widening in amused disbelief.

"You're like a fucking girl." I laugh out loud, the sound of humor mingling with relief in the space between us. And as we both dissolve into shared laughter, a warmth floods my chest, a stripped-down, genuine joy I haven't felt in a long time.

Once the laughter subsides, Cope's tone shifts to something more serious. "Hey, I need to know if he's worth your time," he presses, his smile softening into genuine concern.

"And supporting the Devil Hawks really figures into that?" I tease, arching an eyebrow in playful skepticism.

"Uh, duh," he replies with an exaggerated girlish lilt, standing up, pushing his hip out, and planting his hand on it. I bite my lip, trying to stifle another bout of laughter, but we both break down again. Soon our chuckles fade, leaving us with a moment of quietness. Leaning in, Cope asks, "No, but seriously, Dax. Who is he?"

I exhale slowly, grounding myself before saying, "Some guy, Mike. I don't really know much about him. That's what tonight is for."

Cope scrunches his face in that delightfully teasing expression, his eyes crinkling with a mischievous glint. "Where are you meeting him?" His tone switches back to curiosity.

"All right, Dad," I joke, though the familiar banter does little to mask the underlying anticipation.

“No, seriously. There are some weirdos these days,” he warns with a half-smile, half-serious tone that only deepens his concern.

“Just grabbing a drink at City Sip,” I explain, trying to sound more confident than I feel.

“Fancy,” he remarks, raising his eyebrows, then adds, “Well, message me when you leave, and I’ll come meet you. I won’t be out too late. I’ve got a big gym session tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding, as a genuine smile tugs at my lips. In that moment, everything starts to align: the excitement of a date, doing my first tattoo inked onto skin, and the comforting feeling of a friend who genuinely cares. I inhale deeply, determined to enjoy this turning point rather than fall prey to the relentless echoes of doubt whispering in my mind.

Still, as this new joy unfolds, a nagging thought whispers in the back of my mind.

When will it all come crashing down? Because deep in my core, I know that eventually, everything always does.

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Chapter Sixteen

Trayton

"I'm not seeing it," Bray repeats, squinting at the faint lines on my skin as I pull up my sleeve to reveal the tattoo. I explain to him and Kal where their numbers will eventually be etched. Kal tilts his head to the side, his eyes narrowing in concentration for a moment before he nods. I know that nod. It's his way of getting me to shut up.

He acts like I can't read him like a book.

"Bray, what are you not seeing?" I snap, my frustration bubbling over. The outline of his number is right there, but he just shakes his head, looking confused.

"I'm seeing a lot of lines at the moment," he replies, his eyes darting over the tangled design on my arm.

With an exaggerated sigh, I yank the sleeve of my top back down, rolling my eyes at both of them. "I'm done showing you this tattoo until it's finished," I mutter under my breath.

"Don't sulk," Brayden teases, a smirk playing on his lips.

"I'm not." I cross my arms defensively over my chest.

"You are," Kal chimes in, chuckling into his beer as he drains the last mouthful and sets the empty bottle on the table.

"Whatever. I want another one." I slide my empty beer bottle across the table in Kal's direction as he stands up and heads to the bar. Just then, Cope strides through the door, his voice booming as he calls out to Kal to grab

him a drink too. He saunters over to our table, plopping down in Kal's empty chair.

"Yo." I greet him, glancing behind him. "No shadow tonight?" I ask, unable to resist the dig. Cope gives me a deadpan look before breaking into laughter, shaking his head at my persistence. He then turns to Bray.

"No, Trayton. He's not here, clearly." Cope spreads his hands wide, emphasizing his point.

"Good," I say, a hint of relief in my voice.

Cope and Bray both swivel their heads in my direction, eyebrows raised in unison.

"What?" I ask.

They burst into laughter again, shaking their heads as if it should be obvious why they're amused, but I'm left in the dark.

"He's actually on a date," Cope finally reveals.

"Good for him," I reply. "With who?"

"Why do you care?" Cope asks, peering over the rim of his frothy beer mug that Kal just delivered. I open my mouth to deny that I absolutely do not care—I just like to know things. But before the words can escape, Kal butts in.

"Oh, he doesn't. He *hates* him." I narrow my eyes at Kal, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks.

"Why did you just do the air quotes? I do fucking hate him, you know I do," I snap, frustrated.

Kal leans back in his chair with a knowing smirk, and Cope chimes in, "I think there's a fine line between hate and want."

The unexpected twist of his words sends my mouthful of beer spraying across the table in a sputter. Cope, Bray, and Kal leap off their chairs, dodging the spray.

"Tray, for fuck's sake." Cope groans, wiping his arm with a napkin.

"Well, don't say absurd shit." I set my beer down with a thud. "Fucking hate and want? You lot have been watching too many movies. There's more chance of me wanting a girl than wanting Daxton Rivers."

Kal rolls his eyes and hands me a napkin. "Clean up your mess, drama queen."

I snatch the napkin and start wiping up the beer, glaring at Kal. "I'm not being dramatic. You're being ridiculous."

“Sure, sure,” Bray says, sliding back onto his stool. “Because you totally don’t obsess over everything Daxton does or says.”

“I don’t obsess,” I mutter, screwing up the wet napkin. “I just think he’s an asshole, and I like to point it out.”

Cope snorts. “Yeah, every five minutes.”

I open my mouth to argue, but Kal cuts me off. “Let’s change the subject before Tray has another outburst. How about we play some pool?”

“Sounds good to me,” Bray says, standing up.

I roll my eyes but follow the guys to the pool table, secretly grateful for the distraction. As Kal racks up the balls, I lean against the wall, trying to push thoughts of Daxton out of my mind.

“Teams or every man for himself?” Cope asks, chalking his cue.

“Teams,” Bray says quickly. “Me and Tray against you two.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Since when are we a team?”

Bray grins. “Since I decided I want to win. You’re the best player here.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I say, unable to hide my smirk. “Fine, let’s crush these losers.”

As we start playing, I feel myself relaxing, the earlier tension melting away. Bray and I fall into an easy rhythm, calling shots and trading high fives.

After a few rounds, Cope’s phone buzzes with a notification, and a smirk spreads across his face as he glances at the screen. He taps out a quick reply, his fingers dancing over the keys. “Daxton and his date are on their way here,” he announces, grinning as his eyes lock onto mine with a spark of excitement.

I chuckle, imagining the worst possible scenario. “I bet it’s going to be some geek or something. Can’t wait to see who this is,” I say, full of sarcasm. We saunter over to the bar, ordering another round of drinks. The clinking of glasses and the murmur of the crowd fill the air as Cope’s voice cuts through the noise. “There he is.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Kal groans, disbelieving. Annoyed with their earlier teasing, I stubbornly refuse to turn around. I don’t care about Daxton’s date or his personal choices. Not one bit.

“You’re going to want to see this,” Bray murmurs, his voice close to my ear.

“You lot are more bothered than me about who Daxton’s on a dat—”

“Mike Grady,” Kal whispers, the name barely audible but packed with shock.

“WHAT?” I exclaim, my eyes widening in disbelief. Not the guy from Arctic Bears. I whirl around on my bar stool, my gaze locking onto Mike, who stands there with a self-satisfied grin, eyes flicking to Cope. He, meanwhile, has drawn Daxton aside, and Daxton’s eyes dart between Cope and Mike, confusion etched on his face. Cope’s hands move animatedly, gesturing toward Mike, and I can only hope he’s telling Daxton to end the date immediately. We don’t date rivals. Cope lets out a deep, exasperated huff as he fixes a look of utter disgust on Grady’s face, his eyes narrowing like knives while he steps back with deliberate disdain. At that very moment, Daxton shuffles over to Mike with a sheepish, apologetic grin, his eyes darting around as if searching for reassurance, and together, they begin drifting toward the far end of the cluttered bar. My gaze snaps toward Cope, and I fling my hands wide in silent frustration.

Cope shakes his head slowly, sending one final, ice-cold glare that could have been meant for Grady or even Daxton—perhaps a spark of recognition that he’s a real dick. Without a word, he strides over. Lowering his voice to a murmur barely louder than a hiss. “I can’t tell him who he can and can’t date.” Kal nods in return. Bray’s eyes smolder with anger, mirroring the fury bubbling within me.

“Fuck that, I will,” I snarl as I start to leap from my chair, but Cope’s firm hand and Kal’s steady grip land squarely on my shoulders, pinning me back into the seat.

“Leave him,” Cope growls, his tone low and threatening. “It’s one date.”

My inner voice screams as I mutter, “He’s a fucking rival. We don’t date rivals, Cope. It’s the golden rule.” Every word drips from my mouth with simmering venom.

Cope simply downs the beer I had just bought, giving the bartender a sharp wave for another, as if dismissing my protest. I slam my own beer in one go, lifting two fingers to the bartender. My eyes track down the bar—Mike has his back turned, but Daxton can’t seem to escape my glare. He keeps glancing up with a nervous gulp every time our eyes meet, and I hope my stare is making him squirm.

After we basically down our second beers, Cope says, “Come on, let’s go.” He tugs at my shoulder, and I grit my teeth, reluctantly tearing my gaze away from Daxton. “Let me go to the toilet quick,” I insist, rising and

confidently walking toward the restroom—even though that means passing by Daxton and Grady. The closer I get, the more Daxton's eyes widen as they lock onto mine; he seems to brace himself for an explosion of words that never comes. Steeling my shoulders and knowing Grady can't see me coming from behind, I deliver a swift, heavy knock that hits him square on.

"Fuck," Grady hisses as his drink splatters across his chest, his startled face twisting in pain. A smirk tugs at my lips as I continue toward the mirrored doorway of the toilets. Once done, I wash my hands. In the reflection of the mirror, Grady appears with a smug chuckle. "King," he drawls, mocking me. I barely spare him a glance. "You know Daxton, right?" he asks, casually tossing his thumb over his shoulder. "He's been going on about that Hawksview art project he's doing. Cute," he adds in a patronizing tone, shrugging his shoulders as if the comment were a compliment. I close the gap between us until our noses almost touch.

"I'll look forward to making you cry on the ice like we did last year, you little bitch," I snarl before shoving him hard enough to send him reeling, then storm out of the toilets. Outside, as I begin walking back, I see Daxton being served two shots—each accompanied by a bowl of salt and a wedge of lemon.

Tequila.

My absolute favorite.

Daxton reaches forward to retrieve his shot glass when I suddenly step in from behind and shove his shoulder. The force sends his hand scrambling, and the glass slips from his grasp, shattering against the floor with a burst of splintered fragments beneath us. "Oops," I murmur, steadying myself as I position my body between him and the nearby chair. My waist brushes against his knee in passing, and he slowly looks up, his eyes sparking with an intense and thunderous stare. "My bad for wasting your shot," I add casually, as if nothing out of the ordinary has occurred.

I bend down to pick up the other shot from the bar, glancing at it before asking, "I'm assuming this is Grady's?" Without waiting for an answer, I dip my finger into a small bowl of salt. In that charged moment, I fix my gaze on Daxton, deliberately rubbing the salt along my tongue. His eyes follow the slick movement, wide and unspoken with anticipation, as I toss the shot back without swallowing.

My attention shifts briefly as I notice Grady returning and getting close. I repeat the salt-dabbing with my thumb, and almost before Daxton can

protest, I forcefully push the salty edge into his mouth. My hand snakes through his hair at the nape, twisting and tugging with precise intent that pulls his head backward. His mouth parts involuntarily in a grimace, but his blown-wide eyes stare up at me as salt lingers on his lips. I lean over him slowly, letting a drizzle of tequila pour into his open mouth. I lock eyes with Grady for a split second and then return my gaze to Daxton; his expression is a chaos of wide-eyed confusion and reluctant submission as he gulps down the tequila.

Fuck, he smells intoxicatingly good. Once the tequila fades from my own lips, I reach for a lemon. Releasing my hold on his hair, I observe Daxton's eyes widen in surprise yet burn with heat. His eyes, as green as forest leaves, stir something wild in me, sparking a desire to whisk him away right then and there. I let my voice drop to a sultry tone as I tilt my head daringly toward him. His gaze flickers between the intensity of mine, and he gulps nervously.

"Now suck for me," I command softly, trailing the lemon wedge along his glistening lips that shimmer with the residue of tequila. His lip piercing catches the light. As he parts them automatically, he obeys without hesitation. "Good boy," I whisper in approval as he spits the lemon out.

I cast a teasing wink at Grady, who stands rigidly nearby, his eyes ablaze with a mix of suppressed anger and disbelief while his fists clench tightly at his sides. Ruffling Daxton's hair in a dismissive gesture, I deliberately avoid lingering on his heated gaze, even though every fiber of my mind craves another look.

Turning away, I find Cope, Bray, and Kal quietly struggling to stifle their laughter as they bite their lips. I stride over to them, grabbing my coat casually over my arm. "My work here is done," I announce with a cool detachment. "Let's go."

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Chapter Seventeen

Daxton

"I really don't want to do the interviews today." I bury my face into my pillow and muffle a groan. A sudden, light thud lands on my head, and I glance up to see Cope standing over me. He's in his long basketball shorts, his torso glistening with sweat from his early morning run.

"Come on, get up," he insists, grabbing another pillow from his bed and launching it at me with a playful grin. "You're not human. Who the hell goes jogging at five in the morning?" I mutter, reluctantly swinging my legs over the side of the bed and sitting up; my head droops as if it's too heavy for my neck to support it. I long for the soft cotton of my pillowcase against my cheek again. The temptation to flop back down is overwhelming, but Cope strides over and gently but firmly tugs my hair until I'm sitting upright. I'm too exhausted even to flinch.

I fucking hate Mondays.

Like, who invented Mondays? Sundays and Mondays. They're the devil's days. Sunday because you literally have Monday up your ass screaming "I'm coming," and then Monday because well—it's Monday.

"I think I hate you right now, more than Mondays, and that's saying something," I mumble, rubbing my eyes.

"Oh, I love you in the mornings," Cope replies cheerily. "Come on, you're interviewing the sexiest man on the team first thing." With

reluctance, I force my eyelids open to find Cope striking exaggerated muscle poses. It’s infuriating how large and defined his muscles are.

“I want muscles like that. Maybe in the interview, you can shed some light on how you get them.” I yawn.

“By getting out of bed for a start.” Cope laughs, crossing the room in a few swift strides. He grabs me by the shoulders, steering me toward the bathroom with a playful slap on my butt before shutting the door firmly behind me. “You have ten minutes to get ready,” he calls through the door.

I drag myself to the shower, turn the knob until the water cascades over me, and sink to the tiled floor. The water streams down, warm and soothing, coaxing me into a drowsy trance rather than waking me up. My head lolls back against the wall with a dull thud.

I could totally go back to sleep right here.

“Still can’t believe you fell asleep in the shower,” Cope hisses, eyes wide with disbelief. “I thought you had actually fallen over and were lying there dead or something,” he repeats, shaking his head. The truth is, I did fall asleep in the shower. It’s as if my body finally feels safe and is trying to make up for all those years I barely scraped by with three hours of sleep a night. Now, I’m clocking in a solid eight hours, and the haunting nightmares are gradually fading away. I nearly screamed when I was woken up by what sounded like a bomb going off outside the bathroom door. It was, in fact, Cope nearly knocking the fucking thing off its hinges. I had, in fact, fallen asleep for twenty minutes.

“I was just relaxing my eyes,” I deadpan, trying to downplay the incident.

“You relaxed your eyes for the whole damn night,” Cope says, crossing his arms. “No more locking the bathroom doors. I can’t trust you anymore.” I throw my head back and laugh, the sound echoing as we stride into the locker room.

“You’ve lost it.” I chuckle, shaking my head. At that moment, Jennings ambles over, curiosity etched on his face.

“Share the joke,” Jennings prompts, and Cope launches into the story of my shower nap. Jennings nods in agreement with Cope, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“If my roommate pulled that stunt, I wouldn’t trust them either,” he says, glancing at me sideways. I roll my eyes. “You hockey players are so dramatic,” I mutter, the corner of my mouth twitching.

Just as Cope begins recounting the story to another player—Smithson, I think, though I’m not entirely sure—Trayton, Kal, and Brayden saunter into the locker room. Kal catches my eye, nodding with a small, tight-lipped smile.

“Daxton.” Brayden grins as he heads to his locker. I’m too stunned to immediately respond to Brayden or return Kal’s smile, standing there in disbelief.

Am I in the twilight zone?

“Hi,” I say as Brayden finally arrives at his locker, the metallic clang echoing in the room. Trayton doesn’t even glance my way, too absorbed in his routine as he strides to his own locker and begins peeling off his gear. Good, because after that stunt he pulled on Saturday, I can’t bring myself to meet his gaze. I’m still annoyed with myself for letting him do that. Everyone begins stripping off their tops. I always feel like an intruder during these moments, awkwardly standing around while the team strips down. It’s like I’m a modern-day Peeping Tom, but Coach insists on my presence here for the project. He believes this is when players are either their most at ease or tightly wound, depending on the timing.

“Who don’t you trust?” Brayden asks Cope over the rustle of clothes and the clatter of locker doors.

“Daxton,” Cope confirms with a nod. “He zonked out in the shower, water running and all, with the door locked. So now, it’s no more locked doors for him.” Brayden lets out a bark of laughter, and I can’t help but join in, the sound bubbling up from my chest. The laughter tugs at something inside me, a familiar ache. As if for a second, I’m laughing with Bex, seeing his face right in front of me. They even have the same infectious laugh.

“I mean, slutting it out does make you tired,” Trayton interjects, slicing through the humor like a knife. The room falls silent instantly. Coming from the guy who mouth-fed me tequila. Possibly the hottest thing a guy has ever done to me. But I’m the slut? Because of him, I left Mike not long after. I couldn’t get over why my brain couldn’t remove Trayton’s lips from my

mind and why my dick wouldn’t go down since getting hard, the minute his thumb entered my mouth.

“Trayton,” Cope growls, his eyes narrowing. “I won’t hesitate to drop-kick you.” I raise a hand to calm Cope.

“It’s fine,” I say, locking eyes with Trayton. “You’d know better than anyone.” Trayton’s gaze sweeps over me, assessing, before he sneers, turning away to yank his shirt over his head. Cope claps a supportive hand on my shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

As the team trickles out of the changing rooms, I trail behind. Cope heads to his training session first, and the plan is to conduct interviews once everyone has showered and changed after practice. It’s odd doing interviews in the locker room, with the scent of sweat hanging in the air, but that’s the setup.

Once the team hits the ice, the sound of skates slicing into the rink fills the arena. I settle onto the bleachers, pulling out my sketchpad. I’m supposed to record videos, too, but I’m saving that for the interviews. For now, I’ll capture quick snippets, planning to film more during the season. Watching them go head-to-head with their rivals, I hope to capture the real heart of the game.

I open up my brand-new sketch pad. I’m fucking pissed I lost my last one. After what happened and the panic attack, I ran out of here, barely picking anything up. My sketch pad was the one thing I left.

I only had a few sketches in there, but it’s not really something I wanted anyone finding, and then there was that picture.

Mystic Tealglow.

I let out a bitter chuckle as the memory of drawing it—a surreal, almost out-of-body experience—floods back. Even though the image haunted me, it also recalled the better times. Perhaps it’s for the best that it’s gone. I don’t know why I was drawing it again anyway. It is a reminder every time I walk into the tattoo shop.

I lift my pencil, its worn wood familiar in my grip, and direct my gaze to Cope. Today is his big interview, and I’m determined to capture not just his likeness on the ice but the fierce energy and personality that defines him. Cope is more than just a player—he’s the solid wall between his team and danger. In my mind’s eye, I see him intercepting rivals and blocking all threats as if guarding a sacred sanctuary. Every stroke of my pencil seems

to mirror his relentless determination, the fierce protector who never lets anyone breach his team's line.

As I draw, my hand moves almost on autopilot, sketching Cope in fluid motion. A smile slips free and tugs at my lips as I remember how he reassured me when I hesitantly mentioned a date. His kindness, his protective nature: it all shines through the lines I'm forming. My brain churns with ideas, imagining different angles—one image in particular stands out, not of Cope actively playing, but as a symbolic shield, symbolizing everything he means to his team.

Taking a brief pause to shake out my cramped fingers, I glance around at the rest of the team.

The rest of the team is doing difficult drills and conditioning exercises. Kal's deep, commanding voice booms across the space, his every movement taut with raw determination. His body language radiates a stiffness so intense it seems almost painful, like every muscle is braced for pure anger but also sadness.

I can't shake the way I can read people; it's the artist's curse. My eyes shift to Trayton, who weaves skillfully in and out of a maze of cones, the puck anchored to his stick with absolute precision. Watching him, I see a wild cocktail of controlled hatred, burning intensity, and an explosive burst of speed.

Anger and hate. That's what I see in Trayton.

I hear Coach Denny shout that training is finished, and I grab all my belongings, making sure this time that I have my sketchbook as I head to the locker room. I see the team in front of me, but I quickly turn at the last minute to go to the restroom so I can wash my hands. They're covered in black marks, which isn't unusual, but since I've finished sketching for now, I need to scrub it off. Otherwise, everything I touch for the rest of the day will get marks on it.

This is why I never wear color because it just gets dirty.

Just as I push open the restroom door, a sudden force sends me stumbling forward. I feel a hard shove that forces me into a collision with the cool, tiled wall, making one foot catch on the other. I manage to steady myself, heart racing as I whirl around in shock. "What the—" I begin to protest, but before I can finish, a seething Trayton slams me against the wall. His eyes flash with uncontrolled fury, scanning my face as if searching for something

to blame. The tight grip of his hand on the front of my sweatshirt is his silent message: He's not here to exchange pleasantries.

Trayton's gaze intensifies, darting over my features while his breath grows ragged and heavy. His face contorts, and as he leans in, inches from mine, his seething snarl is almost audible. I can feel the heat of his breath washing over my lips, and my throat tightens as I struggle to swallow, my eyes widening in disbelief. Every nerve in my body screams in protest as I try to understand what is happening.

For a fleeting moment, I hold my breath, but it escapes in uneven, shallow puffs. My heart hammers so loudly I'm sure everyone can hear it.

"You've designed my tattoo now," he hisses, low and dangerous. "You don't need to keep watching me, Quiet Boy." His arm thrusts into my chest with such force that I wince, and then he releases me, his eyes roaming over my body, before he storms out, leaving the door to slam shut behind him.

Alone and trembling, I lean back against the cool tiles and take deep, desperate breaths.

I had no comeback, no retort, nothing.

In that charged moment, I could feel the warmth of his body searing against mine. I had never experienced Trayton so up close. And strangely, despite everything, in that brief exchange, I didn't feel anything but a stirring want. I imagined what it might be like to taste his lips, to feel his tongue soft against mine—a craving I've buried for years.

This sudden, conflicting desire shakes me. I swore to myself that I would never want Trayton again. And yet, in that intense moment, everything I'd secretly craved returned with a jolt.

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Chapter Eighteen

Trayton

I wasn't as eager to get here today as I was a few weeks ago. The thought of spending the next three hours with Daxton made me drag my feet. The last session, I had been full of anticipation, but now, the prospect seems daunting.

Last week, I cornered Daxton in the restroom, expecting a confrontation. I thought he'd retaliate, maybe throw a punch at me. Part of me wanted that to happen, just so I could have a reason to retaliate and explain to the coach later why Daxton and I had come to blows. Self-defense would have been a pretty convenient excuse.

But he didn't react the way I expected. Instead, Daxton just stared at me with wide eyes, his expression frozen in surprise. It was as if the Daxton from last year had returned, and at that moment, I realized something unexpected—I didn't want the old Daxton back. I craved the new, fiery version of him, the one who could ignite something within me.

He didn't look scared though. His expression was hard to read, like a mixture of emotions I couldn't quite identify. Maybe it was just pure shock. After the bar and the whole tequila shot, I didn't expect to go back to my dorm that night, obsessing over the shape of his lips, then falling asleep and dreaming of them in places they absolutely shouldn't have been. It's been years since I've had a vivid dream like that, and yet Daxton's lips were enough to leave me waking up to an embarrassing mess.

Sometimes, I really worry about my brain. It works in mysterious ways; I tell you that.

As I walk in, I notice Max behind the counter. He wasn't there when I was last here—I think. I nod to him, determined this time not to glance at that damn piece of art on the wall. There's something about it that seems to mess with my head, softening my disdain for Daxton, and I can't afford for that to happen.

Daxton's sitting sideways when I enter, slouched in the chair next to mine, completely absorbed in whatever is on his phone. His hair is slicked back, but a few rebellious strands hang down, casting shadows over his forehead. His long, dark eyelashes flutter against the bright screen, drawing my attention. I let my gaze drift to his tight black tank top that clings to his torso, accentuating muscles I hadn't noticed before.

Has he been banging it out at the gym?

He wears baggy jeans with a few chains clinking and dangling from the side, and his outfit is completed with a pair of worn Vans. He doesn't dress like most guys our age, but he pulls off this style effortlessly. It's his unique look, a blend of rebellion and individuality. I can't stand it.

My eyes travel up his body, tracing the intricate black tattoo that starts at his fingers, swirling and curling as if smoke is rising from his skin itself. It winds its way up his arm, wrapping around muscles and veins, and continues its ascent all the way to his neck. It's an impressive tattoo, a work of art really, but I'd never admit that to him.

My gaze shifts to his face, the face that invaded my nightmares the other night, turning them into something more than just dreams—into haunting memories. No matter how incredible his lips felt around me, it was still a nightmare. Anyone would react if they had lips on them like that, but it doesn't mean I have to like him. It was just lips; they could have belonged to anyone.

But those green eyes, the ones that locked onto mine while he took me in as if it was his sole purpose in life, they weren't just anyone's eyes, were they?

And here we go again. My body betrays me, remembering vividly, as heat courses southward while I watch his tongue dart out, tracing his bottom lip and gliding over that silver hoop piercing. My mind rebels against me, and a groan slips from my mouth. Daxton's eyes snap up, meeting mine with an intensity that makes my pulse quicken.

Those damn green eyes.

For the love of all things, I grab the back of my neck, twisting it side to side, hoping the sound of cracking joints will mask the involuntary moan that escaped me.

Daxton lets out a dramatic huff as if the sight of my face is the worst catastrophe he could face this week.

Maybe it is.

After all, he's tangled in the mess of my nightmares too.

"Scum," I say on an exhale, weaving around the oversize leather chair with its worn armrests.

"Sewer," he mutters under his breath, a hint of defiance in his voice. A smile starts to form on my face. This is exactly what I want. Watching someone who thinks they're invincible slowly unravel is far more entertaining than having them submit too easily.

After Daxton gets started, a sharp ping cuts through the hum, coming from the smartphone resting beside him on a cluttered table. My curiosity piques. I'm nosy by nature, always craving to know more, plagued by FOMO—a fear of missing out on anything, no matter how small.

Daxton halts the tattoo gun, hovering above the delicate pattern he's working on, and checks his phone. It's too far for me to see what it is, but squinting, I recognize a familiar dating app icon. I feel his gaze sear into my face, and I meet his eyes with a raised eyebrow, silently communicating my indifference to being caught snooping. Honestly, I couldn't care less.

The tattooing resumes, though Daxton's phone continues to chime incessantly, the same symbol flashing repeatedly. It looks like a hook-up app. I tried it once, but I've since abandoned dating apps. My social life thrives in the bars.

There are plenty of dick-sucking lips and asses begging to be filled there.

Daxton pauses and picks up his phone, typing at an astonishing speed. I watch him, noticing how his lips twitch before he bites his cheeks, clearly trying not to smile.

"I'm paying you to do this tattoo, not to slut around." His lips stop twitching, and he glares at me with disgust. Perfect. I grin broadly, nodding at my arm. "Get on with it." Daxton exhales loudly as if holding back, and I grin again, daring him silently to lose his cool in front of his coworkers, but he doesn't. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and returns to my tattoo.

As expected, the sharp sting of the needle follows shortly. This time, I don’t flinch. Instead, I lean back in the chair and laugh out loud. I catch his colleague glaring at me with pure hatred—she seems more inclined to confront me than Daxton is.

Oddly, I start feeling sleepy, maybe because of the machine’s buzz. “I’m taking a five-minute break,” Daxton mumbles, rousing me. Before I can protest, he abruptly stands and storms off.

What a sucker.

I hear the pinging of his phone. He left it behind. I glance over to where the girl was sitting—she’s gone too—and then at the door that Daxton exited through. After a moment, I lean over and grab his phone. The screen lights up, revealing notifications from the hook-up app with message previews. I chuckle to myself, quickly checking the door again to ensure he’s not returning yet.

I look back at the lock screen, skimming through the first few messages. Rolling my eyes, I move on to the next one. People on dating apps are just the worst.

Packedforyou: **Is your dad a boxer? Because you’re a knockout!**

No, not quite a boxer.

I roll my eyes and scroll through more of these cheesy pickup lines, my disbelief growing with each one. Who actually falls for this stuff? Then my gaze lands on a message that seems somewhat normal.

Ashton808: Tonight at 9 work for you?

I glance up, looking to see if anyone is coming, then impulsively swipe the bottom of the screen. To my surprise, the screen unlocks without a password.

Oh, this is fucking great.

I chuckle to myself while opening the chat with Ashton808, skimming through the last few messages. These were sent when he was supposed to be tattooing me.

So instead of focusing on his work, he was busy texting some guy about meeting up tonight.

Fucking dick.

I exit the chat and sit here seething. Why am I so pissed off? I know exactly why.

It's because he's happy, and I can't stand it.

This whole week has been a nightmare. Everyone likes him. Every single person on the team seems to be in his corner. I even caught the coach grinning at him the other day. Coach, smiling? That's a rare sight, usually reserved for game victories. He never smiles in the off-season. Especially not at us players.

I thought Daxton joining the team would give me a chance to mess with him, to make him as miserable as he once made me. Make him regret ever coming back here.

But I can't. I know if I even raise my voice to him in front of the team, they'd call me out faster than I could blink.

So now I'm sitting here, staring at Daxton's unlocked phone and scrolling through his messages.

And then an idea strikes me, sending a flutter of excitement through my chest. My mind is on fire today. You fucking beauty.

I download the tracker app on Daxton's phone and link his account to mine. As I open the app, his phone pops up on my screen.

It's perfect.

I can track this prick wherever he goes. Even when he sneaks off to meet these little assholes. I might not be able to ruin him in Hawksview, but who says I can't ruin him outside of it?

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Chapter Nineteen

Trayton

"Wanna go to the pub?" I murmur to Kal as I lie back against my headboard, eyes locked on the relentless white ceiling above. My arm aches tonight after today's session. There was definitely more shading this time. I can't stop looking at it in the mirror. I've already shown Kal five times. He was interested the first time but got bored with me shoving it in his face the second, third, fourth, and fifth times. I'll give it an hour before showing him again.

"Na," Kal mutters, too absorbed in his phone to even glance my way. For the past two weeks, every evening has been the same: him, lost in the glow of his screen, his mood darkening the moment that little rectangle lights up—far worse than his usual sulk. I narrow my eyes, straining to catch a glimpse of whatever has his attention, but the screen is too distant. With cautious steps, I inch closer, bending over to steal a better look. A blonde girl fills the frame—who the hell is she?

I lean over his shoulder and, half jokingly, I add, "I mean, if I weren't gay, then one thousand percent, yes."

In an instant, Kal whirls around. His eyes widen in shock as he snatches his phone from his hand and hurls it upward, as if he'd been caught red-handed with his dick in his hand by his mom for the first time. "What the

fuck, Trayton?" he yells, his anger palpable as he grabs me roughly by the shoulders. The force of his grip sends me stumbling backward, leaving a bitter taste of discomfort. He was always the laid-back one. Believe it or not, the guy usually has more jokes than me. But right now, he's a volcano ready to erupt.

I manage a weak joke. "I give her a strong nine."

But there's no hint of amusement in his enraged stare—only shock and disbelief.

"Why the fuck are you peering over my shoulder and digging into my shit?" he growls. His fists clench at his sides, veins visibly pulsing against his skin. I recoil slightly but then straighten, lifting my chin defiantly as I push my hands out toward his rigid arms.

"And since when have you turned into this?" I snap, my resolve fraying as my last flickers of playfulness vanish. I'm fed up with his snappy moods at the moment.

"Is it because of a girl?" I shout now, unable to hold back any longer. "You've been acting like this because of some fucking girl?"

"Trayton, don't—" Kal starts, but I cut him off.

"Yes, Trayton, do!" I shout louder, desperate to force him to spill it all. "Get out whatever's weighing on you right now. I'm about to call Brayden, and we're going to nail this down."

Kal shakes his head as if wishing the ground would swallow him. "I can't," he rasps, his breaths coming in ragged, sharp puffs that seem to punctuate every word.

My patience snaps. "No, you know what—I'm not about to risk having my teeth knocked out over this. Get dressed; we're hitting the gym. And don't fucking say no. I'm calling Bray, and we're going to the gym, where you'll finally tell us what the hell is bothering you. And if words don't cut it, well, we're going to punch it out."

Kal's eyes lock onto mine, a heavy silence stretching between us. For a moment, I brace for his refusal—it's Kal, after all. But then, his shoulders slump, and to my surprise, he nods.

My brows shoot up in shock, but I quickly compose myself and give him a sharp nod. Kal never listens, yet here he is, finally agreeing. Maybe we can finally unravel whatever's been eating at him.

When I call Brayden to share that Kal's ready to vent his frustrations at the gym, I can almost hear the relief in his voice.

The gym, the boxing bags—they've always been our sanctuary.

We learned as kids that fighting each other solved nothing; it only brought more pain.

"You go first," Brayden whispers. We're watching as sweat flies off Kal's forehead with every punch he lands on the bag.

"I brought him here. It's your turn," I say, my eyes glued to Kal. I've never seen him this intense. Whatever it is, it's bad. "Maybe she cheated," I murmur, my eyes widening as I glance at Brayden.

"God," Brayden mutters, running a hand over his face. "Kal," he calls out in the gentlest voice I've ever heard from him.

"Pussy," I mumble, earning me an elbow in the ribs from Brayden, making me grunt.

Kal pauses, gripping the bag to stop it from swinging. "It was when I went to that charity event with my dad a couple of years back," he says, taking deep breaths. "I spent the weekend with a girl and… fuck, she was amazing." He laughs, shaking his head, his mood turning somber. "She had this attitude, a no-fuck attitude, and her confidence—it was unlike anything I've ever seen in a woman." He turns to face us. "I'm not going into the details, but I can't stop thinking about her."

Both Brayden and I sag simultaneously. This is what we needed—to get Kal to open up, even a little. Talking about his feelings is like cracking a code, but this is a huge step.

"Can't you just message her?"

Kal interrupts, his head shaking, cutting me off. "It's complicated," he mutters, a bitter laugh escaping him. "And now she's moved on." He forces a tight-lipped smile. "A family and everything." His eyes flicker with pain. "I know I need to forget about her, but it's hard."

"How do you know she's moved on?" Brayden asks, his brows knitting together in confusion as he stares at Kal.

"Facebook," I interject, recalling the blonde woman Kal had been looking at earlier. Kal glances at me, then back at Brayden, nodding in

confirmation.

“You need to block her,” I state firmly. “Watching her from afar won’t help.” Kal nods again, his gaze dropping to the floor. After a moment, he lifts his eyes first to me, then to Brayden. “It’s just hard… I fell for her, guys.” He laughs, shaking his head in disbelief. “Pussy whipped in one weekend.” Both Brayden and I laugh, but it’s a hollow, sadder laugh. Seeing Kal like this is gut-wrenching.

“Some things happened last year,” Kal continues, glancing quickly at Brayden before staring at the floor again. “I thought it might have been some fucked-up sign. At first, I tried to hold myself back, but then I started believing it was a sign to go see her. So I searched her up on Facebook for the first time, and that’s when I saw her with a man and a kid.” His eyes fixate on a spot on the floor, lost in memories.

Kal, usually the one with all the answers, the straight-and-narrow guy, is anything but that right now. He’s been breaking, drowning right in front of us, and we just let him. We let him brood, thinking it was best. It wasn’t.

Kal’s voice drops to a dangerous whisper, his eyes narrowing. “If you dare tell anyone I said this, I will ruin your fucking life.” He pauses, then adds, almost inaudibly, “But I could really do with a hug from my brothers right now.”

“Shit, I wish I recorded that,” I mutter as Bray and I step forward. Kal’s arms open, and we wrap him in a tight embrace.

“See why I’m gay? You don’t get this shit,” I mumble into Kal’s shoulder, feeling his grip tighten around mine.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Brayden chimes in, pulling back slightly to look at me as Kal loosens his hold. “You just haven’t found the person that’s worth the pain, Tray.”

“Why pain? What kind of love is that?” I frown, puzzled.

“Everyone hurts you, Tray. Whether they mean to or not,” Brayden says softly.

“You just need to find the one worth hurting for,” Kal finishes.

I don’t bother telling them that it won’t be me because love doesn’t exist. Not true love. I learned that a long time ago.

After we finish wrapping our hands and spend thirty minutes relentlessly pounding the punching bags, Cope finally joins us. Sweat drips from my brow as I lean against the wall, grabbing a quick gulp of water from the fountain before wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

“You don’t usually come to hit the bags this late, do you?” I ask Cope.

He gives a nonchalant shrug, eyes fixed on the floor. “I was bored,” he replies.

I smirk, trying to lighten the mood. “Your roommate not providing any decent entertainment, huh?” I joke, but Cope’s expression hardens, his frown deepening as he looks away.

“Geez, relax, man,” I say, raising my hands defensively. “It’s just a joke. I’m not taking a dig at your bestie.” I roll my eyes and start to turn away, but something makes me stop and face him again.

“Actually, no.” I step back toward Cope, who’s now bent over, cupping his hands for a drink from the fountain. “I was your friend first,” I declare, jabbing a finger at my chest. “Why am I being painted as the villain here?” I furrow my brows, trying to convey my frustration.

Cope straightens up and meets my gaze. “Well, because you are,” he states bluntly. “If Daxton had done something truly awful to you, I’d understand and keep my distance from him. But he hasn’t. If he had, you would have told me.” He holds my gaze for a moment as if waiting for me to reveal some hidden truth about Daxton.

But how can I explain about Bex? How do I tell him that Daxton took him from me and relished every single moment of it? How do I reveal that Daxton isn’t the person everyone believes him to be? I can’t find the words, so I just shrug.

“He’s scum,” I declare, frustrated.

Cope leans against the wall, arms crossed, his expression calm but firm. “He’s my boy. And you won’t be going around making his life hard just because you’ve got a bee in your bonnet over him handling drugs now and then. Remember, the guy you call your brother over there,” he says,

nodding at Brayden. “He was brought up around all that stuff too. You’d do anything to protect him, so what’s the difference?”

“Brayden wasn’t a drug dealer,” I shoot back, my voice sharp. “Don’t even try to put them in the same picture.”

Cope leans closer, lowering his voice to a whisper, making sure Brayden can’t hear. “His twin was,” he reminds me. “Is that why you hated Bexley so much? Because of the drugs?”

I glare at Cope, feeling the heat rise in my chest. “I hated Bex for the pain he put my best friend through.” It was only half the truth though. The sight of Brayden wrestling with stress and heartache had fueled my resentment of Bex, but there was more I wasn’t saying.

Cope shakes his head slightly, a hint of irritation in his eyes. “Well, you need to take your head out of your ass, Tray. Dax is cool, he’s a good person, and I’m happy he’s moving on with his life.”

“You sound like a proud mother,” I scoff, rolling my eyes at his seriousness.

“Hopefully, the guy he’s on a date with right now sees his worth,” Cope adds with a touch of sarcasm, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. I turn to him, squinting in suspicion, but he just winks, sauntering past me toward where Kal and Bray are standing at the bags. “And no, he doesn’t play hockey. He’s into investment banking,” he shouts over his shoulder.

“What’s the wink for?” I call after him, but he only laughs, flipping me off with a playful smirk.

I pull out my phone, my fingers moving almost instinctively to tap on the tracker app icon. The screen flickers as it begins to load, but there’s a nagging hunch in my gut that he’s already discovered I’m tracking him. Finally, the app opens, and a small, blinking dot appears on the digital map, pinpointing his location. He’s at some semi-upscale restaurant downtown, a place with white tablecloths and dim lighting that tries a little too hard to impress.

I lift my gaze from the screen to the guys nearby, deep in conversation. They are oblivious to my plans. My eyes drop back to my phone, and I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face.

Time to shake things up a bit.

“Guys, I’ll catch you later. Just going to meet someone real quick,” I call out over their chatter. Without waiting for their response, I turn on my heel and head to the exit.

I rushed back to the dorm and threw on a pair of faded jeans and a snug-fitting T-shirt. I knew this semi-upscale restaurant wouldn't let me in wearing my ratty sweatpants and a tank top. As I approach the restaurant, I fish my phone out of my pocket to confirm that he's still inside. The screen glows with a notification from the app. He's definitely here.

Trying to be as discreet as possible, I linger near the restaurant window, peering inside at the dimly lit tables. My eyes roam the room, initially not spotting him, but then I catch sight of his unmistakable black hair, and there is Ashton808.

He is undeniably attractive, his features sharp and eyes intense. My mind betrays me with an intrusive thought: he'd look incredible on his knees. But then I noticed the person sitting across from him—a green-eyed man who is even more captivating.

I curse my brain for these intrusive thoughts that seem to uncontrollably bubble up. I can't see Daxton's face clearly, but the way Ashton is looking at him is unmistakable, like Daxton is the most delectable thing on the menu. It's written plainly in Ashton's gaze how and where he wants Daxton.

On all fours, with Ashton's dick deep inside him.

I am certain Daxton is a bottom; I can read men like an open book when it comes to being gay. It's my special talent detecting their preferences: top, bottom, or switch. Daxton shows bottom vibes, while Ashton seems versatile but probably leans toward topping. Just like me.

I stride confidently to the restaurant's entrance, where a man with a crisp white shirt and a bow tie stands behind a cocktail table, a large black reservation book open before him.

Damn. It's reservation only.

"Good evening, sir. Do you have—" he begins, but I cut him off, slipping a couple of hundred-dollar bills from my wallet into his hand with practiced ease.

“I’m not eating. I just need to sit at the bar for a drink. I’ll be in and out without anyone noticing,” I say, trying to sound casual. The host, a burly man with a neatly trimmed beard and a piercing gaze, stares at me with wide eyes and then shifts his focus to the crumpled dollar bills in his hand. He swiftly closes his fists and steps aside, allowing me to pass.

“Have a wonderful evening, sir,” he says with a little sarcasm. I nod, offering a tight-lipped smile, and step inside, my eyes immediately locking onto Daxton across the room. I can’t let him spot me.

Navigating through the dimly lit, elegant restaurant, I cross to the bar. “Bud—” I start to order a Budweiser but catch myself. This place is upscale, with chandeliers casting soft, golden glows on the polished wood, so I decide to fit in. “Your finest whiskey on the rocks,” I say, attempting to channel my inner James Bond.

Oh wait, that was martinis.

The bartender, a tall man with a crisp white shirt and a skeptical look, eyes me critically. I reluctantly slide my fake ID across the counter, knowing it’s my only ticket to getting served. After scrutinizing it for what feels like an eternity, he finally relaxes and flashes a warm smile before preparing my drink.

I settle onto a plush barstool, keeping Daxton in my peripheral vision. Across the room, Ashton bursts into exaggerated laughter, and I struggle to fathom Daxton being anything close to amusing. His humor is as dry as toast, lacking any spark of life.

Great lips though. And eyes. Damn.

Impatiently, I glance at the bartender, willing my drink to appear. Soon, he places a fresh white napkin before me and sets down my whiskey. I take a deliberate sip, letting the amber liquid linger in my mouth before swallowing. The burn slides down my throat, a familiar and comforting sensation. Nearly fifteen minutes later, when Daxton finally rises from his seat, my whole body freezes with tension. For a split second, I’m sure he’ll spin around and catch me hidden in plain sight, but he simply moves on, striding deliberately toward the far end of the restaurant—straight for the restroom.

My moment has finally arrived. I down the remainder of my second whiskey, relishing the burn as I push myself upright and start toward Daxton’s table. There, Ashton sits with a furrowed brow, his face illuminated solely by the glow of his phone. I steal a quick glance toward

the back door of the restaurant, take a deep breath, and clear my throat. I can't afford to waste another second.

Leaning in close, I deliver in a trembling voice, "This is going to sound completely fucked up, and I'm truly sorry for interrupting you." I strain to sound as sincere as possible.

Ashton lifts his eyes from his phone, a questioning smile already playing on his lips as he asks, "Sorry, who are you?"

Lowering my voice further, I say, "Look, I'm not going to give you all the details, but that guy you're with—Daxton—he's trouble." I pause, waving my hand in front of me. "Honestly, I shouldn't have come over. I'm really sorry for bothering you." I start to retreat, and just then, I hear Ashton plead, "Wait, please go on." I bite my cheek to hide the smile tugging at the corners of my mouth, shut my eyes for a heartbeat as my expression softens, and steal one last glance at the door behind me before continuing.

Leaning in even closer, my face twisting into a grimace, I murmur, "Let me just say one thing: chlamydia. I learned it the hard way—I wish someone had warned me." Immediately, Ashton recoils, his features contorting into an expression of disgust as he mutters, "Oh god." Without waiting for another word, I spin on my heel and rush out of the restaurant.

Once outside, I cross the busy street and press myself against a lamppost, using it as a makeshift shield while I keep a wary eye on the entrance. I watch as Ashton bolts out the door, as he all but runs away from the restaurant. A wild, toothy grin unfurls across my face. It's a moment of private triumph that I savor silently.

I remain hidden there, heart pounding, convinced that soon his moment of reckoning will come, and I'll get to see the look on his face. Sure enough, less than five minutes later, Daxton emerges from the restaurant. He pauses at the doorway, glancing both ways as if expecting someone to appear. Slowly, I notice his shoulders droop in resignation as the reality sinks in—the person he was after has vanished into thin air. In that fleeting moment, it's clear: his date has made a run for it. He fumbles with his phone, probably going on his dating app, but then his hand drops limply by his side. Standing frozen for a moment, he folds his arms as if trying to shield himself from a sudden chill; his head sinks low before he turns and shuffles away toward what I assume are the dorms not far from here.

A smile tugs at my lips at the sight—until, almost gradually, that smile begins to fade. I watch his hunched, defeated form retreat, his head bowed.

I had expected a surge of satisfaction, a rush of victory, yet instead, I feel a dull ache bloom in my chest. My hand instinctively rises to rub the tight, throbbing space where my heart sits. Confusion and regret mix with the fading adrenaline, and I can’t help but wonder: Why does my chest hurt so badly right now?

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Chapter Twenty

Daxton

I didn't manage to steal a single moment of sleep last night. When I arrived back at the dorm, Cope was nowhere in sight, but I was wide awake when he finally returned. I pretended to be lost in sleep, tucking my shame tightly around me like a heavy blanket, deliberately turning my back. Explaining what happened was out of the question.

I still can't wrap my head around it. We were having a good time; a genuine connection was simmering between us. He appeared interested in me, and yet—damn it—I don't understand at all. After his sudden disappearing act, I even tried messaging him, only to discover that he'd blocked me completely.

Was it all just some cruel joke? Was I merely a pawn in his amusement? Deep down, I wonder if I was, in fact, nothing more than a punchline. And why should I have the right to move on when Bexley never even got that chance? This shitshow feels like karma—a harsh reminder of what I deserve.

The sound of Cope's voice jolts me back to the present, accompanied by his loud stretch rousing from his sleep. This time, I stop pretending I'm asleep; I simply lay there, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Playboy," Cope teases, his tone light, as a soft pillow collides with my face. "I'm assuming that since you were back so early, you didn't get lucky." He pauses to add, "Or whatever you call it."

I say nothing, continuing my silent stare at the white ceiling. What was there to say?

“Dax?” Cope’s voice has softened. He seems genuinely concerned, and I hear the subtle rustle of movement before he looms over my bed, eyes wide with worry. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I mumble, my voice coming out rough and cracked.

“What. Happened?” Cope’s tone shifts, edged with anger, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“He left. Right in the middle of the meal. I stepped away to use the restroom, and when I got back, he was gone—blocked me on the app and everything.” I said it flatly, as if such heartless behavior were normal.

“And nothing happened before?” he presses, brow furrowed.

I shake my head slowly. “Nope.”

“What the fuck?” Cope roars. “Did you at least get his full name or the name of the company he works for? I swear, I’m going to ruin that prick. Mark my words, Dax. He’s not getting away with this.”

I laugh without humor, shaking my head in disbelief. “You won’t do anything. It’s the least I deserve.” I prop myself up before standing. “Just drop it.”

Cope’s expression twists in frustration as he grabs my shoulder. “What you deserve? What the fuck are you talking about?”

Sighing, I realize I can’t be bothered having this conversation with him. He’d never understand. “Nothing. Just ignore me. He obviously just changed his mind. It’s okay. I’m over it.” I fake a yawn and stretch theatrically. “I’m going to wash up, then I need to head out. I’ll catch you later.” I offer him a tight-lipped smile, knowing full well that he has planned a run with Kal this morning, and I plan to hide in the bathroom long enough for him to leave me be.

I lie sprawled on the ice, staring up at the shadowy ceiling of the deserted rink. The lock on the door barely resisted when I picked it open—it wasn’t

my first time breaking into somewhere. The cold seeps through my jacket, biting into my spine as I lie here, lost in thought.

In the short time since I arrived, my mind has been racing. Did I really have any genuine feelings for Ashton? I doubt it. It wasn't just because he ditched me; something deeper inside me recognized that truth. It felt like I was searching for something hard to pin down, something I knew I might never grasp.

Love.

In the past, having a boyfriend wasn't even an option, and now that I have my freedom, I want to dive into every experience life can offer. But some things, like love, feel out of reach for certain people—maybe for me too. I wonder if love will ever be in my cards. I doubt it.

And then there was Bex. It always circled back to Bex. How could I move forward happily when he couldn't? He had been my beacon when my world turned pitch-black, a guiding light through the tangled tunnels of my mind. He reached out to me when life's waves threatened to drag me down.

But where was I when the tide turned against him?

I was in my bed, sketching mindlessly, as usual. He was struggling, drowning, and I was nowhere to be found. I left him to face it alone.

Tears slip down my cheeks, their warmth unexpectedly comforting against the chill of the ice beneath me.

My back and legs are numb, but I don't want to move. I can't. My limbs feel as heavy as lead, and the warm tears against my ice-cold cheeks continue to fall silently. My phone rings somewhere in the distance. Its persistent buzz barely registers as I zone out, fixated on the wispy cloud of steam escaping my lips in the frigid air.

"It's not good for you to lie out here for too long, you know." The familiar voice cuts through the silence, and I laugh, a hollow sound, because somehow, he always seems to appear, and I know it's all Bex's doing. I stay still, not even acknowledging him with a word. Then I hear the slide of footsteps on the slippery ice, and the dim light is blocked as Trayton's face appears above me.

"Daxton," he says, and there's almost a softness in his voice that I rarely hear. Maybe I'm dreaming. Or maybe I'm dead. That could be it. "Daxton." Trayton bends down, his hands gripping my shoulders firmly, giving me a jolt that snaps me back to reality. I blink, then blink again. I'm not dead. I'm not dreaming. Trayton is here, his hands on my shoulders, his

expression genuinely worried. And my back really stings, like a thousand tiny needles poking at my skin.

“I’m cold,” I manage to say, my voice shaky as my teeth begin to chatter uncontrollably. I take a deep inhale of the ice-cold air, feeling it burn my lungs.

“Jesus Christ,” Trayton mutters, rubbing his hands down his sweatpants. I frown, puzzled by his lack of hockey gear, then remember it’s Sunday. That’s why I came here, thinking no one would be around.

“Stand for me,” Trayton commands as he pulls on my shoulders. His hands wrap around my arms, and he drags me up. My feet slip on the icy ground a few times, but Trayton holds onto me tightly, steadying me. He reaches my arm around his shoulders, then snakes his around my waist, guiding me toward the side. As soon as we pass through the gate, he lowers me onto the bench and stands there, frowning at me. He scratches his head, looking at me like I’m the most complicated puzzle he’s ever faced, uncertain where to begin piecing me back together.

“I’m fine. Thanks,” I manage to say, though shivers ripple through me like tiny earthquakes. Trayton sighs, his breath visible in the cold air, and drops his hands, letting them smack against his thighs with a dull thud. He pulls off his sweatshirt, the fabric rustling, and tosses it at me.

“Put that on,” he mumbles, his gaze fixed on the distant bleachers rather than on me. The chill in the air is biting, so I don’t argue. I pull the sweatshirt over my head, the soft material brushing against my skin. The scent of him drowning me. It has a hood, and as the embarrassment of my predicament settles like heavy fog, I tug it up as well. The scent of Trayton’s cologne envelops me, a heady mix of cedar and citrus, and I can’t help but sink into it. He smells incredible. Like an expensive aftershave you’d follow a stranger around just to catch another whiff of.

“What the hell were you doing?” he asks, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that is strangely reassuring. This is the version of him I know—direct, almost confrontational—not the one who would rescue me from a freezing fate.

I’m surprised he didn’t leave me out there. “Just needed some time,” I mumble, unsure of how to explain my actions.

“Some time? Lying on the damn ice?” His features are etched with suspicion.

“I didn’t realize I was out there that long,” I admit, dropping my head, the heat of embarrassment creeping up my neck.

“Who takes time out lying on ice?” he questions again, skeptical. “Like a damn starfish?”

“Me, I guess,” I reply, my gaze glued to a stain on the concrete floor, determined to stare at it until Trayton leaves.

“Next time, go to a park and lie on the grass,” he snaps before turning away. He kicks off his sneakers, the sound echoing in the rink, and pulls on his skates. I remain silent, watching as he glides onto the ice. A hockey stick and puck appear in his hands, seemingly out of nowhere, and he begins to skate. He tears up the ice and down again, his movements gaining speed with each pass. My eyes struggle to keep up with his fluid motion. He’s a ball of energy and precision.

His speed is something so impressive—a blur of motion that leaves me questioning how anyone can ever hope to catch him during a game. Every time he rockets past, the bitter cold slices at me like a thousand tiny blades.

Without any warning, Trayton screeches to a stop just ahead of me, his skates sending up a spray of ice chips. He fixes me with an unwavering stare that sends my heart pounding, my body rigid with hesitation. Instinctively, I begin taking off the sweatshirt, assuming this is why he’s looking at me.

“Keep it on,” he commands, low and steady. I freeze for a heartbeat, then reluctantly lower my arms, tugging at the sleeve as an uneasy knot forms in my stomach under that unblinking gaze.

“What?” I ask, my voice betraying my confusion.

His eyes narrow slightly as he inquires, “What were you doing lying on the ice, Daxton?”

I start to protest, “I told you, I needed—” but he cuts me off, his tone flat and matter-of-fact. “You were crying.”

I grit out, “I was cold.” Even though I know it hardly qualifies as a good enough excuse for the well of tears I spilled. At that moment, I silently plead for the floor to just swallow me whole, erasing my vulnerability.

Trayton tilts his head, squinting as if trying to decipher a secret code hidden behind my eyes. Somehow, despite knowing he’s the last person I should confide in, the moment of us here alone makes me want to tell him everything, and I hate it. Even though exposing my inner turmoil makes me

feel raw and exposed—and he always seems to relish that—I can't hold back any longer.

After a long pause, I admit, "I was thinking about Bexley, and I've been trying to come to terms with some things." It's all I can say, even though my gut screams that I shouldn't overshare. Not with him.

For a moment, his head dips in silent contemplation before he asks softly, "What things?"

I lift my gaze, locking eyes with his, and a surge of emotion twists inside me. It's maddening how his eyes have the power to flip my stomach, a familiar sensation that mimics free-falling from a dizzying height. There's a rush—a dangerous thrill—knowing that when you stare deeply into those eyes, your safety net shatters, leaving you to plummet into the cold, unyielding reality of him.

I blink rapidly and fix my eyes on my trembling hands before whispering, "Just my future and what I deserve." Trayton's intense gaze remains fixed on me; his jaw tightens, and after a brief pause, he slowly nods and challenges, "And what do you deserve?"

"Not a lot," I reply instantly, the words tumbling out before I can hold them back.

A low, mirthless laugh escapes him as he pushes off, skating in a graceful circle. He returns to stand directly in front of me, then casually runs his gloved hands through his disheveled hair.

"I don't know what happened for you to come here, but…" He pauses, his brow furrowing deeply, and his jaw clenches as if the words he's about to say physically cause him pain. "But…" He hesitates again, the silence stretching between us. "You've just got to dust yourself off and move on. Pick yourself back up and keep going." He fires it back at me so quickly that it takes me a moment to process his unexpected kindness. Why is he being nice to me?

I bite my lip, lowering my head as a smile threatens to break free, but I know that smiling around Trayton wouldn't be good for me. Then I hear the soft humming as he begins to glide in circles on the rink. He's actually humming to a song, his head bobbing slightly, and then his voice breaks free, belting out the lyrics to god knows what as he skates by.

And there it is. The smile is let loose as I watch him, his carefree energy filling the space. I don't think I've ever seen him like this before. His eyes

catch mine, and though I can’t suppress the grin, I duck my head, grateful for the hood that hides most of my face. My cheeks burn crimson, as usual.

That’s when my smile falters, and I glance up to see Trayton staring at me as if he’s seen a ghost. His eyes are wide, his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard, and he stands there, frozen. Then he shakes his head, and the look vanishes.

What was that about?

He skates over to the side where his gear is, grabs his sneakers, and then he’s gone, leaving me sitting there in his sweatshirt, wondering what the fuck just happened.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Daxton

One month later

"Please come out with us," Cope whines next to me. I've turned into a complete hermit since my date a month ago. I don't know why, but it put me in a bit of a funk. That and my phone constantly ringing with a private number.

One guess as to who that is.

If I'm not in classes or doing my art project with the hockey team, I'm in my dorm, sitting in bed.

Trayton has barely looked at me since the day on the ice. Since he was semi-nice to me. He even canceled our tattoo session, saying he had plans that he couldn't move.

I want to get it finished because I can't wait to see how good it looks, but not having Trayton coming at me or saying something that just pisses me off has been quite refreshing. I won't lie.

I didn't take his advice. I didn't dust myself off or even forget about it. I kept thinking about the date, going over and over in my head what I did wrong.

I'm not good at being around people or even having friends, for that matter. I've only ever had one, and the people I have been around haven't exactly been very nice. I thought me and Ashton were getting along. I thought I could do this whole dating thing.

Obviously not.

Cope is still raging about it. He keeps asking me questions about Ashton. He's trying hard to find out where he works. I pray with everything that he's never successful.

I've begged him countless times to let it go, but he just can't stop bringing it up. Like right now.

"If you come out with me, I swear I'll never say one more thing about that damn pig," he insists, trying to tease me. I glance up at him from where I sit cross-legged on my bed, surrounded by the familiar chaos of my things. My sketch pad rests open on my lap, filled with the rough outlines and detailed doodles I worked on during today's training session.

"You swear you'll never mention him again?" I ask, raising an eyebrow skeptically. He extends his pinky finger toward me, his expression earnest.

"Okay, we don't need to do that," I say, waving a hand dismissively.

"Pinky me right now, Daxton," Cope demands, his gaze locked on mine with an intensity that only he could muster.

"Don't ever say that again." I chuckle, unable to contain my amusement.

Cope's face crinkles in confusion, his brow furrowing as he tilts his head slightly—a gesture I've noticed he makes whenever he's puzzled. Then I see the moment of clarity hit him. His blue eyes widen in realization, and he shakes his head vigorously. "Yeah, no. I don't want your pinky anywhere near my ass. I'm good for that," he says, a sheepish grin spreading across his face. The fact that it took him a solid twenty seconds to catch on sends me collapsing back onto my pillow, my amusement turning into tears. Cope's deep, infectious laugh joins mine. "You've got a dirty mind, Rivers," he teases, and when I sit up, still wiping tears from my eyes, I burst into laughter again at the sight of him still holding his pinky up at me.

"Just pinky swear me, you dick.".

After managing to calm down, the laughter still bubbling just beneath the surface, I finally link my pinky with his.

"I can't even remember what we're swearing now," he admits, scratching the back of his head.

I squint at him, playfully irritated.

"Oh yes, the pig. No more, if you come for a drink."

I let out a long sigh, thinking that a night out might do me some good, and I could definitely use a break from Cope's constant chatter about Ashton.

"Okay," I agree.

Cope beams at me, his face lighting up with triumph as he punches the air. “That’s my boy,” he exclaims, his enthusiasm infectious.

The room is buzzing with energy, filled with people from college, not just those on the hockey team. It’s comforting to know I’m not the odd one out. I found myself chatting with a group of girls who were gushing over my tattoo, their eyes wide with curiosity and admiration. While I’m not one to bask in the spotlight, it felt nice just to have conversation with others.

Suddenly, Trayton interjects loudly, announcing to the girls that I’m gay. Some of them sigh in disappointment and walk away, leaving Trayton chuckling at the scene. Two of the girls, however, simply shrug, giving me a once-over as if I were a prime steak on display, and one of them says, “I don’t mind.”

I don’t have the energy to explain that, first, I do mind, and second, sexuality isn’t a simple switch that can be flipped on and off. It’s not as simplistic as some might think, and not every “hole is a goal.”

Thankfully, Brayden comes over and gently pulls me away from the awkwardness, for which I am immensely grateful. As I join in other conversations, I begin to feel at ease, almost forgetting that I’m not technically part of the team. Despite not being a hockey player, they always make me feel like I’m one of them and as if I’ve always been on the team. Especially Cope. He just took me under his wing as if it was so natural and just never looked back.

God, I’m so thankful for that guy.

Trayton hasn’t hurled any insults my way yet, which is nothing short of a miracle, but I’ve noticed him shooting daggers at me. It’s as if he’s waiting for the perfect moment to unleash his hateful shit.

I hear Kal grunt, and Trayton spits out some swear words. Brayden’s demeanor shifts instantly; his relaxed features tense up, and a stormy intensity clouds his eyes. I tilt my head to see what has caught their attention—a group of big guys is entering the room. Judging by their size, I’m guessing they are hockey players.

I glance back at my table, and Cope slides into the empty seat next to me, leaning in to whisper, “Arctic Bears.” I frown in confusion, and then realization dawns on me. That’s Mike’s team. Shit. I haven’t texted him back since Trayton decided to invade my mouth that night. Literally.

“Oh, okay. Rivals, right?”

“Yep. Davenport College.” I glance back over my shoulder, catching sight of the group standing by the pool table. They’re smirking, their eyes glinting with a mix of challenge and mischief. I don’t see Mike, thank God. That’s when I shift my gaze back to Brayden.

Quake.

I’m not scared of a fight. I’ve been through my fair share of them, but right now, I’m just enjoying the music and the laughter around me. It would be a shame for all of it to come crashing down.

“What happens now?” I whisper to Cope, so quiet it’s barely audible over the dull roar of conversation. His eyes are fixed on our rivals like he’s calculating them. Before Cope can reply, Kal slams his beer onto the table, the sound echoing around us.

“We treat them as if they’re not here,” he declares. He’s steady and commanding. Everyone’s attention shifts to Kal, and then, with a collective breath, they lift their beers, taking long pulls, though the air is still charged with tension.

Chatter begins again, and soon enough, the group across the room fades into the background like an old song no one wants to hear.

I’ve had four beers, and the liquid courage is making me feel slightly buzzed and more than a little smiley. I’m aware of my surroundings, the way the room spins gently around me. Cope stays close, his presence like a warm blanket, which makes me relax and maybe drink a bit more than I should.

“Beer?” I ask the table, raising my empty glass. Everyone lifts their glasses, signaling they’re still good. I weave my way through the crowded room toward the bar. It’s packed, and I find myself standing there for five minutes, watching as the bartenders move like choreographed dancers. One finally glances my way, holding up two fingers to signal it’ll be a couple more minutes. I’m in no rush, so I lean against the bar, observing the chaos of people shouting for attention. That’s when I feel someone squeeze in beside me. Without looking, I move along slightly.

“Thanks,” he says. I turn my gaze to him.

Mike. I kinda forgot how hot he was. His dirty-blond hair falls in casual waves, and his ocean-blue eyes have a depth that could easily pull someone under. A sharp jawline frames his face, leading down to a smile that could melt ice.

“Hi, Mike.”

“Daxton.” He smirks. There’s a slight awkwardness, but I would have expected him to be hostile toward me. Instead, he just stares at me with a hot-as-fuck smirk. Then the barman interrupts us.

“What can I get ya?”

“Beer and whatever Mike here is having.” The words slip out of my mouth before I can stop them, my usual restraint nowhere to be found. It’s just a drink, right? Mike’s face lights up with an ice-melting smile again, a dangerously attractive grin that makes my heart skip. He turns to the bartender with a nod.

“Make that two,” he says smoothly before focusing entirely on me. His gaze flickers to the table where the guys are gathered, then back to me, taking in my five-foot-eleven frame and one-hundred-and-eighty-pound build. “You’re with them a lot, aint ya?”

I chuckle, nodding my head. “Cope’s my roomie.”

He nods. “Now it makes sense why he has a constant death glare on the side of my face,” he says, smirking down at me. He’s taller than me by a few inches, his broad shoulders filling out his snug shirt, hinting at the strength beneath.

He leans in, his lips almost brushing my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. “Are you checking me out, Daxton?” he murmurs. The warmth in my cheeks betrays me, and his fingers lightly trace the blush.

“Cute,” he teases. His smirk exudes a charm that’s impossible to resist.

We chat for about twenty minutes, the world around us fading into the background, until Cope interrupts. His eyes narrow at Mike, his posture tense as if ready for a confrontation. But Mike just responds with that irresistible smirk.

“I’m going back to the dorm. You coming?” Cope asks firmly.

I glance between Cope and Mike, my mind racing. “I was hoping to get to know Daxton a little better tonight,” Mike interjects, his words layered with suggestive possibilities. Maybe casual encounters are more my speed than dating. It’s all I’ve ever known, and I can handle that. “We got rudely interrupted last time.”

“Cope, I’ll see you back at the dorm later,” I assure him.

“Or tomorrow,” Mike adds. Suggestion is thick in the air. Cope growls—yes, actually growls—and pulls me aside.

“Dax,” he says all serious.

“It’s fine, it’s nothing. I’m happy with that,” I say, placing my hand gently on Cope’s arm, trying to reassure him. “I’m good. I know he’s a bear or whatever you call them, but it’s just harmless fun.” Cope stares at me, his brow furrowed with concern.

“I don’t care that he’s a bear. I just don’t want him taking advantage of you.”

“I’m good,” I repeat, hoping my eyes will convey the certainty I feel in what I’m saying. Cope’s gaze flickers between me and Mike, then back to me, his jaw clenching tightly.

“Hurt him, and you can kiss the ice goodbye because I’ll break both your legs,” Cope warns.

Mike bursts into laughter, the sound echoing. “He’s good,” Mike says, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

Just when I thought Cope wasn’t going to drop it, he lets out a deep breath and walks away, his shoulders still tense. “Just going to the restroom,” Mike says as he stands up. I nod, settling into my chair and picking up the drink, the condensation leaving a cool ring on the table.

I’ve done this before. Bex and I went to enough parties, and I’ve hooked up with a few guys, but that’s it. So why do I feel a flutter of nerves now, like butterflies in my stomach?

“You’re fucking joking, aren’t you?” A harsh voice cuts through my thoughts.

Fucking great.

I turn in my chair to face Trayton; his expression is furious. “Why did Cope just say you’re staying here with that fucking loser?” he demands, his eyes blazing.

“Go home, Trayton.” I sigh, trying to turn away. But before I can fully swivel my chair, he grabs it, spinning it back so that he’s right in my face. The intensity of his presence is overwhelming—his scent, his glare, his proximity.

“He’s a fucking rival,” Trayton growls, low and rumbling. “You don’t fuck the rivals.”

Screw him.

I lift my chin defiantly, ensuring my gaze locks onto his firmly. Those piercing, fucked-up bluey-green eyes, like shards of ice, have the power to make anyone tremble with vulnerability. Yet I refuse to give in.

No. No. I despise him and those damn eyes.

“I’m not a hockey player,” I grit out through clenched teeth, rising to my feet and forcing Trayton to stumble back a few steps. Determination fuels my movements as I close the gap between us, ensuring my words are delivered with unshakable certainty.

“So, if I decide to fuck the rival,” I whisper, my lips brushing against his ear, “I will.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Trayton

I run my fingers along the intricate lines etched into my skin, tracing the tattoo on my arm. Each stroke feels like a ghostly whisper of the needle that once pressed into my flesh, held steady by a pair of firm hands. I remember the sensation of my arm being gripped, the slight pressure as he leaned over me, carefully rubbing at the ink.

If I want to fuck the rival, I will.

To hell with him. Grady's one of their weakest players anyway. Trust Daxton to pick the dud of the team.

Who does he think he is, really? He's supposed to be on our side. Coach made it clear: You're part of the team, and that means you don't mess around with the rivals.

Prick.

Kal finally got his act together and hooked up with a girl after we hit the bar. Maybe now we'll have the old Kal back. Without all his whining over some girl he's never going to see again. Not that I'd ever say that to his face—I like my face the way it is.

I glance down at my tattoo, a swirl of art I genuinely love. Yet, I can't stand knowing it was him, Daxton, who inked it onto my skin. He designed it, and I hate that. I want to look at my tattoo and feel joy, but every glance reminds me of his face. I rise from my chair, pacing the confines of my room. Why do I let this jerk get under my skin so much? Why can't I stop thinking about him?

The memory of seeing him sprawled on the ice, tears streaming down his cheeks, stirs something deep within me. A crack in my resolve. Suddenly, I wanted to be kind, and that was new—I'd never wanted to be kind to Daxton Rivers. I wanted to see him smile, to be the reason behind that smile. But why?

When he finally did smile, it took my breath away for a moment, his expression reminding me so vividly of someone from my past. I couldn't let myself drift back to those days, to connect Daxton with those long-buried emotions. But still, he has a nice smile—a really fucking nice smile.

And he blushes a lot, which, I hate to admit, makes my heart race. There's something irresistible about the way his cheeks turn crimson, especially when I'm the one causing it.

He's still a complete prick though.

That's exactly what he is, and I can't stand him. I despise Daxton Rivers. I repeat it like a mantra, my fingers trailing over my arm, the surface now smooth, the scabs long gone. But then a thought pierces through my mind.

Oh, my mind is twisted, but how I revel in its madness.

I rummage through a chaotic drawer, my go-to spot for random items, until I finally grasp it. Daxton's business card. His number is printed on it. Excitement rushes through me as I dial the digits into my phone, eager to send a text.

M

I need you to get to my dorm ASAP. It's an emergency. My tattoo doesn't look right.

I sit back, a smirk spreading across my face when the message is read almost immediately. Grady must be dull company tonight.

Quiet Boy:

What do you mean it doesn't look right? Send me a picture.

Damn. I didn't expect him to ask for a picture.

M

My camera is broken. You need to get here.

I glance down at my flawless tattoo and can't help but chuckle. Oh, Daxton, I'm about to ruin your evening.

Quiet Boy:

You keep saying something isn't right doesn't help. It should be fully healed; it's been a month. What doesn't look right?

If I were in his shoes and someone I inked said there was an issue, I'd rush over without a second thought.

M

It's got orange pus seeping out of it.

I watch the typing bubble appear and then vanish.

Quiet Boy:

ORANGE??????

Fuck. Shit. Damn. What color is pus again? I quickly search on my phone —white and green, it says.

M

I meant green. I think I have a fever or something. Hurry, Daxton.

Green, orange—close enough, right?

Quiet Boy:

Shit. Okay. Give me 15. What's your dorm number?

M

666

Quiet Boy:

Figures.

Daxton cracking a joke is unexpected. Even though his texts don't indicate that he's drunk, I can't help wondering what state he'll be in when he finally shows up.

Fifteen minutes later, a harsh knock sounds at my dorm door. I crack it open, trying to hold back a laugh, but it escapes uncontrollably when I take in the anxious crease on his brow and the troubled set of his eyes.

Before I can get a word out, he blurts, "Let me see it." He's practically tripping over his urgency. I step aside and tilt my head.

“Come in.” His eyes don’t leave the sleeve covering my arm as he edges closer to the door. I close it behind us with a subtle flick of the lock.

“Trayton, let me see,” he insists, and before I can protest, his hand grips my arm, his fingers tugging my sleeve upward. His gaze roams over the expanse of the unfinished tattoo etched on my skin, and his fingertips begin to trace it with a deliberate, searching pressure. With every passing second, his forehead creases deeper until the intensity forces him to glance up at me—while I desperately keep my expression neutral.

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” he demands, disbelieving; it’s as if his very words momentarily reveal his own shock at the deliberate lie I’ve made.

“You fucking prick.” He releases my arm with a rough shove. “You did this on purpose,” he accuses, disappointment and anger mingling as his nostrils flare and his fists clench with barely restrained anger.

I smirk and taunt, “Go on, I know you want to.” I fully expect his rage to erupt into a swinging fist, yet surprisingly, his assault never comes.

“It’s fine. I have Mike’s number. Move so I can get back to my evening.” He dismisses me, his tone final and cold.

“Oh, Daxton.” I lock eyes with him—those once-bright, green eyes now darkened with simmering anger and hurt. “You’re not going anywhere.”

He arches his eyebrows in a defiant challenge. “And you’re going to stop me?” It’s as though he truly believes I stand no chance of holding him back.

“Well, yeah,” I reply, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. No sooner do the words leave my lips than he shoves at me. Instinctively, I grab his hands and pin them securely behind his back. He wriggles, desperate to break free; his raging eyes are fixed on mine with a wild intensity.

“Let me go, Trayton,” he hisses, straining against my grip. Standing over his five-foot-eleven frame, my warm breath caresses his flushed face, and I watch as his lashes flutter in frustration. We’re dangerously close now, and despite the chaos of the moment, I cannot—will not—allow him to slip away. The image of his full, demanding lips and the haunting recollections of him from my dreams—no, my living nightmares—floods my mind. In an unwelcome twist of want, I feel a shiver of sensation ripple through me.

What the fuck is this feeling?

“Does Max and everyone at the tattoo parlor know about your old life, Daxton?” His entire body stiffens, his shoulders drooping as if a heavy weight has just been placed on them. The silence that follows is more telling than any words he could muster. “Didn’t think so,” I say and give a smug grin.

“You’re a fucking cunt, you know that,” he snarls, his lips curling back to reveal gritted teeth. I imagine if I let him go and took a step back, I’d see his fists clenched tightly at his side. He’s likely envisioning all the ways he could inflict pain on me, picturing his fists colliding with my face and the satisfaction it would bring him. Meanwhile, my mind drifts to thoughts of him on his knees, his lips wrapped around my length.

Does he gag?

Does he swallow it?

Does he spit on it?

Does he savor it like it’s the best ice pop he’s ever tasted? My gaze fixates on his mouth, and I can’t help but imagine how perfectly those lips would fit around me.

“Get comfy, Daxton,” I say, my voice now low and gravelly. The tension in the air is palpable, and I’m painfully aware of the hardness pressing against my jeans. All I would have to do is push myself into him slightly and he’ll feel it too.

At that moment, I decide I don’t care if he does. I push myself into him, watching as his breath hitches and his eyes widen, the dullness on his face replaced by a spark of electricity.

I lean down, my lips grazing his ear. My body tilts forward deliberately, and I murmur, “I want my dare you owe me.” Each word is heavy with the promise of something more intoxicating. I let go of his hands, but I don’t step back. I stay towering over him, his body plastered to mine.

For a long moment, his eyes search mine as if trying to read my intent, and when the realization finally washes over him, his gaze slides down to my chest, losing eye contact with me. “Go to hell, Trayton,” he grumbles, stepping back with an almost dismissive gesture. “What do you want from me?” he huffs out, his arms rising dramatically before they fall, and his palms slap against his thighs. “You don’t want me to fuck the rival. Fine, I won’t.” His eyes lock onto mine with unwavering intensity.

I tilt my head, letting a knowing smirk play across my lips. “I want you on your knees.”

The words hang in the charged air, and Daxton’s face shows a flicker of shock as he blinks rapidly. “Sorry, what?” he asks so weakly he seems to falter under the weight of my challenge. I don’t take my eyes off him as I walk backward toward my bed.

“You heard me.” My eyes trail down his body, lingering on every defined muscle and curve, as he stands here, rigid, caught off guard—a deer frozen in

the glare of headlights. “On your knees, and crawl to me.” I’m both playful and commanding, and I tilt my head further and offer a challenging smirk. “Remember.”

I settle back onto the bed, my body sinking into the soft, messy pillows, and watch him stand anxiously in the middle of the room. The sight of him, illuminated by a sliver of fading light, stokes a fierce desire inside me. Daxton’s lips, so enticing, seem almost too fuckable to resist, and I know I’ve got him exactly where I want him—there’s no room for no.

“I’m not kissing you,” he declares, tilting his chin up defiantly.

“Who said anything about kissing?” I tease.

“That was the dare,” he reminds me, with an edge to his tone.

Raising my hand slowly, I point directly at him. “You’re right. But what you didn’t know is that if you forfeit, you have to do the ultimate dare.” A sly smirk spreads over my face as I speak, my words sounding as fearless as they feel, knowing full well that if he did end up checking whether I’m talking shit—which I am—it will be too late anyway.

“What’s the ultimate dare?” he asks, a trace of vulnerability creeping into his voice.

“You get on your knees, crawl to me, and suck my dick until I’m coming down your throat.” The instruction hangs in the air as I watch him throw his head back in a raw, noisy laugh that fills the room.

“Good one,” he manages between bursts of laughter, and I can’t help but be drawn to his genuine smile and the warmth in his eyes.

“I may be good with a joke now and then, Daxton, but right now, I’m anything but joking.” Instantly, his laughter falters, replaced by a tense stiffness; his shoulders tighten, and his breathing quickens, revealing the mix of desire and uncertainty pulsing through him. I lean back on my elbows, tilting my head as I study every subtle shift in his body language.

“And what if I say no?” he whispers in a near-inaudible murmur that trembles with hesitation.

I allow a confident but gentle smile to curve my lips as I meet his eyes. “You won’t.”

“Because if I do, you’ll tell Max about the drug dealing,” he says flatly, more of a statement than a question. I don’t respond verbally; instead, I fix him with a smirk that I know gets under his skin, the kind of expression that always seems to light a fire of irritation in his eyes. “You know that’s sexual assault, right? It’s blackmail.”

“I didn’t say anything,” I reply casually, and I shrug my shoulders, maintaining an air of calmness.

“You don’t have to. It’s you, Trayton. It’s written all over your face.” I bite my lip, studying him carefully—the tension in his shoulders, the way his chest rises and falls with each breath, the intensity in his gaze as he assesses me. If this were something he truly didn’t want to do, I’d see it in his body language. So I decide to test my theory. I sit up, lazily peeling my shirt off before reclining back on my elbows. His eyes widen, and I know I’ve hit the mark.

His gaze travels over my body like a magnet drawn to every contour and muscle. His eyes trace the lines of my pecs, and I watch as he visibly gulps, his fists clenching tightly at his sides, his breath becoming ragged.

“It would be sexual assault and blackmail if you didn’t want to do it,” I say, cutting through the charged silence. His eyes snap to mine, and I let my gaze travel over him from head to toe. “That’s not the case here.” To cut through the tension and because, frankly, I enjoy this, I slip my hand into my sweatpants, pulling out my dick with casual confidence.

Daxton’s lips part, and his gaze fixes on me as I move my hand up and down, each stroke deliberate. My skin tingles just watching him, the way he stands there, eyes glued to me, and I think I might reach the edge just from this moment alone. But then he does the unexpected.

He drops to his fucking knees.

He doesn’t immediately collapse to his hands; instead, he descends to his knees in a controlled, almost fearful manner, his hands resting lightly on his thighs. His gaze is fixed on my hand… With a speed so slow that it’s almost painful, he moves his hands to the floor, fingers splayed against the cool hardwood, and drops his head, dark hair falling forward to conceal his face.

“Eyes on me, Daxton.” The words escape my lips in a breathless whisper. I never expected this image to be so intoxicating, but here he is, a picture of raw, wild desire.

His head lifts slowly, cheeks flushed a deep pink, just the way I like them. The green of his eyes has deepened to a midnight emerald, the black of his dilated pupils blending seamlessly. His tattoos, dark and shadowed, stretch down his arms, visible beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his thin cotton sweatshirt. His lip ring glints under the faint overhead light, and his fingers, decorated with heavy silver rings, tap nervously against the floor with every slight movement.

He’s a fucking masterpiece.

When he finally reaches me, his chin is almost resting on my knee. I sit up, leaning forward until my dick is mere inches from his lips. My heart hammers in my chest, and my breath hitches. His lips are so close that if he were to stick out his tongue, he'd lick my dick. The thought alone sends me into overdrive, my hand pumping my dick faster, squeezing the head tightly. A bead of pre-cum appears at the tip, glistening in the dim light, and Daxton's breathing stutters.

"Shit." The word is a low moan, drawn from deep within me. I force myself to slow down, to make this last. I don't want to come yet, not like this. I want to be buried deep in his throat when I do.

Daxton's eyes dart from my face to my dick, fixated on the drop of pre-cum as it rolls down the head. His breath hitches again, becoming erratic. He darts his tongue out, a quick, feral movement, and licks up the bead of cum. It's so fast that if I blinked, I would have missed it.

"Fuck." The word is an exhale, a release of pent-up tension. Daxton's eyes flutter closed as he licks his lips, savoring the taste. His breaths are ragged, uneven, matching the wild beat of my heart. I can barely breathe, barely think; anticipation is coiling tight in my gut as I wait to feel those lips wrap around my dick.

"Daxton. Lips. Now." The command escapes my lips in a husky groan as I squeeze the tip of my cock, drops of pre-cum glistening at the slit. Daxton doesn't flinch, his lips parting slightly as he leans forward, mouth wrapping around the head, and sucks gently. I can feel the warm wetness of his mouth as he takes me in. My head falls back, eyes rolling as I release my grip, and a guttural moan escapes from deep within my chest.

Daxton doesn't hesitate. I force my head up and look down, eyes locked on him, not wanting to miss a single moment. His cheeks cave in, creating deep hollows as he sucks, the pressure building as he does it again and again. I can feel the tension building, the familiar tightening in my balls that tells me I won't last long. Daxton pushes forward, taking more of me into his mouth, and I know he won't be able to take all of me, but fuck, he tries. When my cock hits the back of his throat, I swear I see fucking stars, and what feels like electric jolts shooting through my body.

"Fuck, fuck," I pant, my balls drawing up tight, and I grasp Daxton's hair, pulling sharply. He lets out a hiss as his lips slide off my cock, eyes wide as he looks up at me from his position on the floor.

His lips are swollen, a deep, glossy red, and his eyes… his eyes are black. There isn't a trace of green left, just pure, endless midnight.

I grab the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair, and guide him back to my cock. I need his mouth on me again. Fuck, this is too good. Better than any fucking dream. Nightmare.

His lips wrap around my cock again, and I watch him. I watch as his eyes go heavy in lust, and then they flutter closed like he's in pure ecstasy. I watch as his hand snakes down to rub at himself through his jeans. And I watch as his eyes flicker up to me, and all I see is pure hunger. And something else… relief in the way his shoulders relax and the way his eyes open and lazily close again.

Like this is what he's been wanting, what he's been craving, and he's finally, finally getting it.

Well, fuck him for wanting this. And fuck me for wanting him right back.

I stand, my spine curved and fingers tangled tightly in his hair at the nape of his neck, making sure his lips are still wrapped around my cock. I tilt his head back, catching his eyes this time. I pin them with my sharp gaze, and he keeps them open, blinking rapidly despite the watery sheen glazing his eyes.

"Let me show you how much I hate you." My voice, rough and low, cuts through the heavy breathing and the suppressed moans vibrating in Daxton's throat. I pull my hips back slightly, then thrust forward, filling his mouth completely. The gagging noise that escapes him fuels me, and when his hands push against my thighs, it only drives me to plunge deeper.

I look down at his eyes, swimming in unshed tears, and press against the back of his throat, holding myself there. His throat convulses around the tip, sending waves of pleasure that make my eyes roll back in my head. I look down at him again; his eyes are still on me, tears now streaming down his face. "Cry for me, Daxton," I growl. He closes his eyes, more tears spilling over. "Fuck yes." I groan loudly, then slam my dick into his mouth one last time as he chokes, gasping around my dick for air. My balls tighten as my stomach flips, and my whole body erupts in goose bumps. I empty myself down Daxton's throat. He gags but swallows what he can, some of it dripping down his chin.

I release his hair, and he immediately pulls back, breathing heavily, staring down at the floor. I tuck my dick away and sit back down on my bed, my chest heaving. I stare at his tear-streaked face, his cheeks flushed red, his breath still coming in ragged gasps. His lips look swollen and bruised.

He looks fucking wrecked. And that's when I realize, in this moment, he needs to leave. He needs to go right now. Before I do something stupid, like ask him to stay.

I stand up from my bed, crossing to the door, and quietly flip the lock. The sound is barely audible, but it snaps him out of his daze. His head jerks up abruptly, and I can see his eyes are bloodshot red. I linger by the door, the tension between us thick in the air. “Let me know if Mike likes my taste,” I taunt. His nostrils flare, and he clenches his jaw tight as he rises from the floor.

“Fuck you,” he rasps, his voice hoarse and raw, yet it brings a twisted smile to my lips. Daxton grabs the handle, his shoulder brushing against mine as he swings the door open and strides out. My mind is a flurry of conflicting emotions, screaming at me to stop him, to ask him to stay. As I watch him walk down the hallway, a sense of dread creeps over me, knotting my stomach.

I hate him. I shouldn’t feel this way. I should be relieved he’s leaving.

“Daxton,” I call after him, stepping out of my dorm room. He freezes mid-step but doesn’t turn to face me. When I remain silent, he finally glances over his shoulder, his eyes dark with anger as they lock onto mine.

I should beg him to stay. I should promise not to expose his secrets about his past life.

But I don’t.

Instead, I do what I do best. “Jamie sucked dick better.” His eyes widen in shock, and he shakes his head in disbelief before storming off down the corridor, his footsteps echoing off the walls.

I want to grin, to revel in the satisfaction of fucking with him.

But instead, a hollow feeling settles in my chest.

I feel almost… sad.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Daxton

Did I sleep at all last night? Not a chance. The whole night felt like some bizarre fever dream—did it really happen? Well, yeah, it must have because every attempt to swallow sends a sharp twinge through my throat. It was my first time sucking dick, and my throat feels raw, as if it's been scraped with sandpaper. I think he's actually bruised me from the inside. Despite the discomfort, I can't deny the thrill that coursed through me during those moments.

Every single second of Trayton treating me as a toy to play with and having his way with me plays on repeat in my mind. It's twisted, I know. After everything he did last night—disrupting my evening plans with Mike, someone I still haven't texted back. Spinning lies and then blackmailing me into submission. All before uttering those final words as I left.

Of course Jamie had gone down on him at the party. There's no surprise there, especially after witnessing Jamie practically devour Trayton's face. A pang of jealousy hits me when I think about Jamie with him, an ache settling in my chest. Anger follows, knowing he'll continue to fuck whoever he wants. Why am I letting this get under my skin so much? But it does—it really does.

I should be more furious with Trayton than ever before. But strangely, I'm not.

The memories of last night won’t leave me alone, and that’s why I’m lying here, restless and dripping with need. Thankfully, Cope was already asleep when I returned; I couldn’t handle questions about my night with Mike when, in reality, it was all about Trayton and his intoxicating existence. As much as I hate to admit it, Trayton is addicting in all the wrong ways.

It figures that I stopped smoking weed to then just get hooked on something worse.

I glance over at the bedside clock, its red digits glaring five a.m. at me. I can’t just lie here, consumed by thoughts of him and my strange want for him. I should have fought back, broken free from that room. I should never have let myself fall to my knees for him.

And most definitely, I should never have sucked his dick.

I know what it’s like to get a taste of Trayton now. How am I meant to let that go?

I scrub my hand down my face, hoping to rub away these thoughts, but they cling stubbornly. Maybe some fresh air will help clear my mind. I slip out of bed quietly, careful not to disturb Cope. The room is dimly lit by the moonlight filtering through the curtains. I know I could lie. After all, when does Cope ever talk to Mike? But I’m terrible at lying. My voice always falters, and my cheeks betray me, flushing bright red every single time. My damn cheeks.

Closing the door quietly behind me, I linger in the shadowy, deserted corridor, my heart pounding in my chest. Pressing my ear against the wooden surface, I strain to catch any sound from Cope, but all I hear is silence; a relief washes over me. The cool air outside greets me as I step into the darkness, the stillness calming my racing thoughts. The campus sprawls behind me as I wander down the deserted path, the gravel crunching softly beneath my feet. I let my mind drift through the memories of past years, each step a reminder of the struggles and the accomplishments that have shaped who I am today.

I’ve carved my own path, and though I rarely acknowledge it, I deserve to recognize how far I’ve come. Yet, as inevitable as the sunrise, my thoughts circle back to him—Trayton King.

He was the mysterious boy who always seemed just out of reach, the one I watched from afar, craving the impossible. But over time, that wanting twisted into something that resembled hatred, or so I convinced myself. Did I truly despise him, or was it easier to mask what I felt with hatred? Every harsh word he directed at me was a shield, a barrier that made it easier to pretend I didn’t crave his touch or the taste of his lips.

After last night, the truth became undeniable. When he told me to drop to my knees, my resolve crumbled. I didn’t resist, and he knew I wouldn’t. His threat to tell Max was a mere formality, a way to give me an escape that I didn’t truly want. If Trayton ever asked me to drop to my knees again, I know that resisting would be a battle I might not win.

But it will always be hate between us because when Trayton said, “Let me show you how much I hate you,” he did just that. The sick thing is, I love how much he hates me. If that’s his way of expressing himself, then I’ll forever be content knowing that Trayton holds such strong feelings toward me. If that’s Trayton’s version of hate, then I’ll give him hell every single day.

This walk was supposed to clear my mind of him, to let the crisp air and rustling leaves distract me, but instead, his image dominates every thought. I find myself recalling every detail—those piercing, haunting eyes that have followed me since childhood. His strong jawline, tense and defined as he spat out his hatred for me last night. His large, powerful hands that gripped my head with a force that left me no choice but to accept everything he was giving. His full, commanding lips that parted wide when I brought him to his climax. Those lips that I will forever crave to feel against mine.

I knew this would happen. I saw it all along, yet I tricked myself into thinking I could control it. I can never control anything Trayton King does, and that’s the undeniable truth. I can never control how deeply that guy makes me feel.

Sighing, I pivot on my heels, kicking at the gravel beneath my feet. The new sunrise creates long shadows across the empty street, and I feel a tug of acceptance deep within me. What’s the point of being out here, walking, trying to clear my head, when I’ve already admitted to myself what I’ve known all along? I want Trayton King. It’s as simply complicated as that.

I let out a chuckle, a sound lost in the breeze, as I start walking back toward the campus. My thoughts are a tangled mess of emotions, so much so that I don't notice the black sedan creeping along the curb, trailing me, until it's too late.

"Daxton." That voice slices through the air, sending a jolt down my spine. It's the voice that echoes in my nightmares, the one that wraps around me with an icy grip. My heart skips a beat as I glance up, the familiar brick buildings of the campus just visible in the distance. If I just sprint, I might make it…

"Don't even think about it." My Uncle Marley's chuckle is as cold as the wind that whips around us, the car inching along at a snail's pace beside me. I turn my head slowly to meet his gaze. Those eyes are like chips of ice. The devil, I've always called him that. Making a deal with Marley is like selling your soul; you never truly get it back, and you never truly escape its grasp.

There's no point in running. Marley would sooner run me over than let me walk back through those gates. The car halts, and I exhale heavily, a cloud of breath in the cold air, knowing I have no choice. Panic claws at my insides as I circle around the car. I grip the handle, the chill of the metal grounding me momentarily, and a lump forms in my throat. Am I ever going to see that campus again? It seems melodramatic, but if Marley wants me to vanish, he could make it happen. The car door creaks open, and I steal a glance back at the campus, a fleeting thought of escape flickering in my mind.

"I just want to talk to my nephew, that's all," he says. The shadows obscure his face, but I don't need to see him to know he's lying. The sarcasm and smirk are palpable in his voice. With one last look at the campus, I sink into the front seat, the door closing with a final, ominous thud.

As soon as I slide into the passenger seat, my mind races, expecting the doors to lock with a mechanical click, but the sound never comes. Marley sits motionless, his hands resting on the steering wheel. I had assumed he would speed off the moment I was inside, but the engine remains silent. My gaze is fixed on the dashboard, knowing that if I allow myself to look at him, the flood of anxiety will overwhelm me, and I can't afford a panic attack in front of him. I can't let him see the power he holds over me.

“You haven’t been picking up my calls or your father’s,” he remarks with an unsettling cheerfulness that makes my skin crawl.

“I’ve been busy with school,” I respond, grateful for the long sleeves of my sweater that hide the evidence of my anxious nail-picking.

“It takes what, a few minutes to have a conversation with me or your father?” His tone is suddenly sharp, like the edge of a knife. This is Marley—unpredictable and volatile, a chameleon of moods. One moment calm, the next a storm; you never quite know where you stand with him.

“Like I said, I’ve been busy,” I repeat, trying to keep my voice steady. But before I can process what’s happening, Marley’s hand clamps my head. My head whips forward, crashing into the dashboard with a sickening thud. A white-hot pain explodes across my face, and I feel warm blood trickling from my nose. Dazed, I blink against the blur of tears, realizing with a jolt the reality of what just happened.

Marley leans in close, a venomous whisper in my ear. “Don’t talk down to me, Daxton. I will ruin your fucking life just like that,” he sneers, snapping his fingers with a sharp crack to drive home his threat. I focus on breathing through my mouth, the metallic taste of blood pooling, and nod in mute agreement, my mind a whirlwind of fear and submission.

“Now get out, and don’t get blood anywhere in my car.” His voice is cold and sharp. I don’t need a second invitation. I fling the door open and scramble out as fast as I can. “Oh, and Daxton, when I call, you answer.” He throws another order my way just as I slam the door and break into a run back toward campus. Each step sends a fresh jolt of pain through my face, and I can feel the warm trickle of blood seeping through my sweatshirt. The closer I get to campus, the more the pain intensifies, but I can’t slow down. I need to reach the safety of my dorm, the one place where I might be able to catch my breath.

As I sprint through the iron gates, the sky starts to lighten. My mind races as I consider what to do next—I have to clean myself up before anyone, especially campus security, sees me. The thought of explaining this mess makes my stomach churn. If the truth gets out, it’ll reach the coach, and then the dean will get involved. That’s the last thing I need.

I hurry into the communal restrooms, my heart pounding in my chest. I splash cold water on my face, trying to wash away the blood and the shame. My gray sweatshirt, now stained and ruined, is a lost cause. I peel it off and

toss it into the trash without a second thought. My nose throbs painfully, and I dab it carefully with a wad of tissue.

This isn't the first time Marley has pulled something like this, and deep down, I've always known it wouldn't be the last. As I finish cleaning up, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My face is a patchwork of already-blooming bruises, and my eyes are shadowed with fatigue and worry. I wince at the sight. My left eye is already bruising, and a deep-purple bruise is already spreading across my cheekbone. "Damn it," I mutter under my breath, trying to think of a plausible story. I could say I tripped and fell—that might work. Or maybe I got jumped on my way home last night. No, no, Cope would never buy that. He's like a hound on a scent when it comes to me. He'd probably demand security footage from every shop and bar I passed.

Maybe I could say I was out for a walk. It was dark, and I didn't notice the curb. That might sound believable. Or I could text Cope, telling him I've got a pile of work to catch up on. With all the energy I've been pouring into my art project, that excuse is a good one. I could hide away in the library all day. But then there's tonight to worry about. Damn it. And I have Brayden's interview today. I can't cancel on him; it's too important. I exhale deeply, bracing myself. With one last look at my battered face in the mirror, I head out the door, ready to face the music.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Daxton

"Trayton King, you're fucking dead," Cope shouts, his voice echoing off the metal lockers. As soon as I stepped into the room, there he was, sitting on the edge of his bed with his phone clutched tightly in his hands. The moment our eyes locked, his expression twisted into one of pure rage, like a storm brewing behind his eyes. He leaped up, demanding answers with a relentless barrage of questions. I stuck to my story about tripping on a curb, but he pressed harder, wanting to know the street and why there wasn't a streetlight. His interrogation was relentless, and he knew my shaky answers would eventually trip me up.

And they did. I fumbled, saying I fell while walking away from campus when I'd earlier claimed it happened on my way back. My head pounded like a drum, each beat syncing with the chaos unraveling around me. All I craved was the comfort of my bed, but Cope had other plans. He had a theory cemented in his mind from the start—even during his intense questioning—that Trayton was responsible for it. I joked that if hockey didn't work out, Cope would make a damn good detective, but now his relentless hunt seemed less amusing.

He refused to listen when I insisted Trayton wasn't involved. He dismissed my pleas not to confront him, ignoring every word I uttered. And now here we are, in the locker room, where Kal is struggling to restrain

Cope, and Brayden has his hands full, holding back a bewildered and justifiably pissed-off Trayton.

“I haven’t fucking touched Daxton. What are you talking about?” Trayton shouts, confused and angry. Becketts, another team player, has his arms wrapped around Cope to help Kal as they both struggle to keep him from lunging forward. Trayton’s denial isn’t entirely true, but we will ignore that.

I step into the room, and the chatter instantly dies as all eyes widen and a collective gasp fills the air. “It wasn’t Trayton, I told you,” I yell, pushing my way in front of Cope, who is practically vibrating with anger—his face red and his fists clenched in fury. “I swear on everything, it wasn’t him, Cope,” I plead, trying to stay steady despite the chaos. Cope’s eyes never leave me, and gradually, his rigid stance slumps into one of utter defeat. I take a quick, regretful glance at Trayton, and with a soft, almost inaudible sorry, I notice that his eyes have ignited with an intensity far worse than before.

“Who the fuck did that to you?” he demands, frowning as confusion mixes with irritation.

I answer in a low, pained voice, “I fell.”

“Bullshit!” both Trayton and Cope roar out in unison. I let out a heavy sigh while massaging my eyebrow, the movement sending a sharp, shooting pain through my nose.

Before any more words can be exchanged, the door crashes open, and Coach storms out of his office. His booming voice cuts through the tension, “What the fuck is going on in here?” His fierce gaze lands on me as he barks, “King, Rivers, office now.”

Almost immediately, Trayton shouts defensively, “It wasn’t me! For fuck’s sake!” As we trudge toward the office, Trayton abruptly seizes my arm. His grip is desperate and rough as he hisses, “I don’t care what you tell Coach, but you’re going to tell me who did this to you. If it’s Grady, he’s dead.” His simmering anger is palpable as he flings open the office door.

Inside, I launch into an explanation, “Look, it wasn’t Trayton. It wasn’t anyone—I was out on my morning walk and didn’t see the curb. I fell.”

“Bullshit,” Coach snaps immediately.

Trayton quickly adds his own frustrated input. “That’s what I said.” Coach fixes Trayton with a piercing, disapproving look that forces Trayton to raise his hands in reluctant surrender. “Coach, it was not me, I swear. I’d at least do it where you couldn’t see it,” Trayton stammers.

I want to come back with a sharp remark about my throat, but I bite my tongue.

“King,” Coach growls.

Feeling increasingly frustrated, I vent, “What is it with everyone today? Can’t people just believe me? I fell—that’s all there is to it!” My frustration simmers beneath the surface, though I hold it in because the truth isn’t something anyone needs to know.

After scrutinizing me for a long, tense moment, Coach finally concedes, “Fine. But any more marks on you, Rivers, and I’ll be getting the dean involved.” I merely nod in agreement.

As Trayton and I leave the office, he pulls me aside into the shadows, away from prying eyes.

“Talk,” he commands

I cross my arms and ask, “Why do you care?”

With a dismissive shrug, he replies, “I don’t—just curious.” But the storm brewing in his eyes tells me it’s more than that. I wonder, does he really care?

Of course he doesn’t.

“Just leave it,” I snap, pushing past him with determination, afraid that if I linger, I’ll spill everything and start treating him like my knight in shining armor. Because he’s not. Trayton would be in the front row of the *Watching Daxton Fall* movie, grinning at every stumble.

I need to remember that.

I spent the entire training session watching them run drills, completely unproductive, not a single line sketched on my pad. My mind was tangled with what Marley had said. At the time, I didn’t fully process his words or even feel the panic because I was too worried about everyone else’s reactions. But now, sitting alone, the panic has settled deep in my bones. *When I call, you answer.*

I know what Marley wants. He wants me to jump through hoops for him again, to move back into that cramped trailer. But that’s not happening. I

can’t return to that life, not after experiencing a glimpse of this one. My gaze drifts to Trayton, focused intently on the puck, weaving it skillfully between obstacles. Not after knowing what Trayton King tastes like.

If I went back to that trailer, Trayton wouldn’t come near me again. But who says he will anyway?

Damn.

Before I know it, the training session ends, and I find myself trudging back to the locker room, mentally preparing to interview Brayden. My stomach churns with dread; I remember the way he looked at me earlier, his eyes filled with knowing.

He knows. Of course he does.

Once the players finish showering and leave, I set up the camera in our usual spot near the window, where the light is decent, though the backdrop remains a stark, blank wall typical of locker rooms.

“So, what—”

“It was Marley, wasn’t it?” Brayden cuts me off, his eyes soft with concern. His expression hits me like a wave of nostalgia, reminding me of moments with my best friend Bex, and just like with Bex, I can’t bring myself to lie. I nod, the truth heavy in the small space between us.

“Has he got you doing things?” Brayden asks quietly. I shake my head, though my voice trembles with uncertainty.

“No. He’s trying though.”

“What are you going to do?” Brayden asks. He seems genuinely concerned; his brows furrow as he studies my face.

I shrug, feeling the weight of uncertainty pressing down on me. “I have no idea, Bray, but I can’t go back to that life. I won’t.” My jaw tightens as I force myself to meet his gaze, eyes heavy with sadness.

“You can’t,” he insists, making my heart clench. “You’ve started fresh, and it’s here. This is where you belong.” His words stir something deep inside me, and tears prick at my eyes. No one has ever told me I belong somewhere, especially not someone I expected to hold resentment toward me. Yet, here he is, giving me a lifeline, and it means everything. Despite my efforts to contain them, emotions well up within me.

“Dax.” Brayden breathes my name, softening.

“He’s ruined so many lives, Bray. I’m so sorry,” I whisper, the dam breaking as tears spill over.

“Hey, hey,” he says gently, standing up and crouching down in front of me, his brows knitted in concern. “This isn’t your fault.” He sighs deeply, the weight of everything clear in his gaze. “I know I treated you badly last year, Dax, and I’m sorry for that. I was angry, sad, and tired. I blamed everyone and everything for Bex.” My lip trembles as his words sink in, tears cascading down my cheeks and pooling in my lap. “Dax, look at me.” His voice anchors me, and my eyes slowly lift to meet his.

“It wasn’t your fault. You were Bex’s lifeline for all those years, just as he was yours. He was lucky to have you by his side through it all.” His words break something open inside me, and sobs shake my frame as Brayden’s eyes glisten with unshed tears. “You really miss him, don’t you?” he whispers.

“So fucking much, Bray. Some days, it feels like I can’t breathe at how much I miss him.” A single tear escapes down Brayden’s cheek, and he offers a weak smile.

“I get it,” he says, capturing the shared pain between us. He places a comforting hand on my knee. “It’s not your fault. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you that last year, Dax.” He stands and envelops me in a tight hug, his arms warm and grounding. “I’m really sorry.”

I sob into Brayden’s shoulder. The words I’ve secretly wanted to hear are finally spoken aloud. Even if I can’t fully believe it yet, hearing him say it means more than he knows. It’s my family. It will always be partly my fault.

Once my sobs finally quiet, he leans back and walks to his chair, giving me a soft smile. His own eyes are bloodshot.

“So,” I say, attempting a tight-lipped smile, “the team.”

“Trayton,” he replies, a smirk playing on his lips like he’s holding a secret.

“What about him?” I ask, doing my best to sound casual as I lean back in my chair. But relaxation is far from what I’m feeling. Why would he bring up Trayton to me now?

“His…” He gestures vaguely in the air, searching for the right word. “Anger, I guess you can call it”—he rolls his eyes, dismissing the notion—“toward you, just ignore it. I know it can be hard because, well, it’s Trayton. That guy could summon a room to hell with how much he talks, but it’s just that—talk. Very little bite.”

“Well, last year…” I begin, recalling his fists in my face, but Brayden cuts me off.

“He was a very angry person last year, but he’s getting better.” He smirks, a knowing look on his face. “You could say he’s even softening for certain people.” His eyebrow arches suggestively in my direction.

“Not me.” I laugh, shaking my head.

“Uh-huh. Because he hates you, right?” He looks at me like he’s unraveling all the lies I’ve ever told, toying with them like a cat with a ball of yarn.

“You’re his best friend, you would know.”

“Not necessarily. Now Trayton can talk, but he doesn’t talk about his feelings.”

“Well, yeah, he does hate me. *A lot*.”

“Is that what he told you last night when you were in his dorm?” Brayden’s eyes twinkle with mischief.

I stare at Brayden, my eyes wide with shock. How the hell does he know?

“How?” I frown, confusion and curiosity clashing within me.

“Kal was walking back to his room when he saw you and ducked around the corner.” Brayden’s voice carries a hint of amusement, his eyes twinkling with mischief rather than judgment.

“It was a moment of weakness. It won’t be happening again,” I reply, trying to sound firm, even though there’s a slight waver in my words.

“Sure, sure,” Brayden says, stretching his arms over his head, his grin widening to reveal a set of straight, white teeth. He seems delighted, almost like he’s savoring every second of my discomfort. “Anyway, back to the interview.”

I watch Brayden, his eyes bright and sincere, as he shifts the focus back to our task. The warmth in his smile makes it impossible not to join him in moving on.

“What does hockey mean to you, Brayden?” I ask, adjusting the camera to capture his response.

After thirty minutes, the interview concludes, and I have to admit, Brayden's words have left a big impression. They were the most heartfelt I've recorded so far. Each sentence had so much emotion and determination, drawing me in effortlessly. As he gathers his gear, I begin to pack up the equipment.

"How's the project coming along?"

"Really good. I've been dedicating a lot of time to it, so I probably won't be here for the next few sessions. I need to hit the library and catch up on some other work," I explain, feeling the weight of my to-do list.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing it, Dax." He gives me a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Oh, and you should come out with us more often. It was nice seeing you out and smiling." His sincerity is palpable, and I can't help but nod and smile in response. "Even if you were talking to the rivals." He side-eyes me with a smirk. "Oh, and Bohdi says hi. Well, actually, he said, 'Can you tell my favorite ex-pupil I said hi?'" Brayden's smile is infectious, and I find myself grinning.

"Tell Mr. Stiles—I mean Bohdi—that I said hi back. But I think you were definitely his favorite." I winced as I corrected myself. I arch an eyebrow, and we both break into laughter.

"Catch you later, Dax," Brayden calls as he heads for the door.

"Bye, Bray." I turn back to the camera, ready to pack it away, but Bray's voice stops me once more. He's at the locker room door, one foot outside, ready to leave.

"Jamie never sucked Trayton's dick, by the way. Trust me, we would know." His smile is broad and teasing, and with that, he's gone. I'm left staring at the door, my cheeks flushing crimson before my mouth spreads into the widest grin I've ever worn.

Fuck.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Trayton

"Tray, I want to talk to you for a minute," Brayden says as he flops down onto my bed. He leans back, resting his head against the wall, settling in as if preparing for a long conversation.

"What's up?" I ask, mirroring his position, my back pressing into the cool, hard surface.

"It's about Daxton."

My whole body tenses at the mention of the name, and Brayden notices, letting out a short, amused huff. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him watching me intently, his gaze sharp and firm like a hawk's. His stare makes my skin prickle because Brayden knows me too well. He can read every flicker of emotion—when I'm happy, excited, or drowning in sadness and moodiness. But the worst part is how he always catches me in a lie before I've even spoken.

"I need to know what's going on," he presses after a prolonged silence. I weigh my options carefully, wondering if I should act ignorant or spill the truth. There isn't a specific reason I kept this from him for so long, but sometimes secrets grow beyond their original size, becoming heavy. This is one of those times. The longer I kept quiet, the more daunting the truth became until I couldn't bring myself to approach the subject at all. "And don't use my brother as an excuse, Tray. I love you. You're my brother, but I know it's more than this. I know it's more than him being who he is and

where he comes from. I talked to Kal, and he said I need to speak to you. It's not his place to tell. So, I need you to tell me. I need to know where this hatred has come from."

His words ignite a spark of anger inside me. Yes, Daxton is who he is, and he comes from where he comes from—that should be enough explanation. Not everyone has a choice in their family, true, but Daxton didn't exactly make any moves to break away from that life, did he? No, he embraced it fully and dragged Bexley down with him.

"Hatred?" I huff a laugh, the sound bitter and sharp. "He's part of that family—how can you just let this slide? How can you face him every day?" Brayden's shoulders sag like a puppet whose strings have been cut. He takes a deep breath, his chest rising and falling heavily, then turns his body fully toward me.

"You know it's not his fault, Tray. I know you understand that." He is steady, but there's a faint tremor beneath the surface of his statement.

"Yeah, not directly, but what did he do to stop it?" "Think back to when Bexley went downhill, Bray. Daxton was suddenly around a lot, and I did everything I could to stop Bexley from doing what he was doing. I was twelve years old when I found out what he was doing for that scummy family. Twelve years old, and I did everything I could to get Bexley to stop." My voice cracks, the words tumbling out like a confession I didn't know I needed to make. I avert my gaze from Bray and clench my fists so tightly that my knuckles turn white.

"I know you did, Tray. Bexley loved you; you were his best friend." My jaw tightens until I'm amazed that I don't hear the sound of a molar cracking under the pressure. He loved me? Yeah, I don't think so. I keep my eyes fixed on the worn spot on my bed between my legs, my breath coming in heavy, uneven bursts.

"Bex dipped his toe into that life, then he got tangled up in it." Bray's voice is a low murmur, thick with the weight of memory. "He wanted a better life for me and him, and he saw no other way. I blamed myself for a long time, Tray. I'm still working on how not to, but I know now it was my mom. If my mom hadn't turned her back on us, then he would still be here now. He wouldn't have felt he needed to choose the life he did. Like a fly to a web, Tray. Once he was caught, that was it." Bray's voice breaks, and my eyes shift to his face. He dips his head, wiping a hand across his damp eyes.

I reach out, my fingers curling around his hand, and hold it tightly in mine, offering what little comfort I can. “There was no escaping.” His statement is heavy. He pauses, eyes narrowing as he leans forward, his words cracking with a mix of anguish and anger. “Imagine this, Tray. You’ve been trapped in that web since the moment you took your first breath.” His voice rises a notch. “Imagine being born into that suffocating web, clueless about what might come next, unsure when the next threat will pounce. You’re that fly, caught in sticky strands woven so tightly there’s no escape. It’s the life stamped on you before you could even choose—a life where every day, those cold, relentless spiders prod and manipulate you. You’re utterly alone, abandoned by anyone who might have cared. And then, out of the depths of that darkness, a boy steps into the trap willingly—his arms and heart intertwining with the mess you find yourself stuck in.”

His eyes shift from our entangled fingers to mine, softening, but I see the fresh pain etched on my best friend’s face. I swallow hard, wishing I could do anything to help him. “Bexley was a lifeline for Daxton that day, Tray. He saved Daxton just as Daxton rescued Bexley in return.”

A tremble escapes my lips. “But he was mine,” I whisper, barely audible.

“Who?” he asks, his voice rough with surprise.

I let my gaze dart between Brayden’s now deeply furrowed brows as he fixes me with an intense stare, his eyes searching as if they could unravel the silent tales spilling between us. “Bexley,” I say, thick with grief and disbelief. “He was mine, and Daxton took him from me.” Brayden’s brows knit together even more tightly—his eyes flickering between mine like a shutter, capturing every unsaid word, every hidden tremor of rage and torment that I have never voiced. “He was yours,” he murmurs. It’s not a question but a statement.

I shift my focus back to our intertwined hands, our fingers gripping for comfort. I nod slowly. “He was like a beam of light, Bray—an overwhelming, brilliant fucking light.”

“The brightest,” Brayden croaks and then sniffles. I squeeze his hand tighter, silently urging him to hold on while I battle with surging tides of emotion. I remember the two times I’ve cried since losing Bex—the first was when I found my best friend desperately trying to perform CPR on his twin in his childhood bed, and then the heart-wrenching funeral where my best friend stood, vulnerable, before over thirty people, his voice breaking as he recounted how shattering it was to lose his twin.

“Remember that day at the rink?” I begin, my voice soft yet lost with memories, catching a subtle nod from Brayden out of the corner of my eye. “I was quicker to get ready than you and Kal. After our training session, I rushed over to the vending machine to grab some snacks. That’s when I saw him—a boy staring straight at me. I could’ve sworn I was just with him in the locker room, but the moment our eyes collided, I knew instinctively that it wasn’t you. There was a sadness in your eyes, yes, but his had depths of darkness—eyes that had witnessed far too much shit. I don’t even know how I saw it at such a young age.” I laugh softly, the sound bitter with irony.

“I get it,” Brayden agrees quietly. “Bex’s eyes—those eyes told a whole story.”

“They did. A really dark story,” I murmur in agreement. “Anyway… he turned his gaze away from me for a fleeting moment, his eyes clouding over with frustration, before snapping back to the old vending machine. With a swift, forceful kick, he sent it shuddering, and a crinkling bag of brightly colored Jolly Ranchers tumbled out.” Brayden burst into uncontrollable laughter. “You both hated Jolly Ranchers.”

I laugh, just as Brayden chimes in unison, “We hated Jolly Ranchers.”

“He was so fucking angry, Bray. His brows were drawn tightly over eyes that burned with anger, and his mouth was set in a firm line. In a sudden outburst of fury, he snatched the scattered candy from the machine, tossing them violently onto the hard floor before stomping on them as if trying to crush every single one.” I chuckle, remembering watching Bexley and thinking he was a breath of fresh air. I can’t explain how many days I just wanted to throw stuff down on the floor and stamp on it, and here Bexley was, vandalizing a vending machine and still fuming with what it gave him for free.

“I walked up beside him and said, ‘I take it you don’t like Ranchers.’ He frowned even more, as if he couldn’t believe the audacity of a stranger talking to him. I placed my money in the vending machine and typed in some numbers, a few things falling out for me, you, and Kal.” I smile, looking at Bray, who smiles back at me. “Then I asked him what he wanted, and he pressed the button of what he wanted, and guess what dropped out.”

Brayden suddenly inhales sharply, as if the memory had flooded back with full force. “A Nerds Rope,” he whispers, and another sharp gasp escapes him.

“Yep. As soon as you walked out of that locker room, my heart skipped a beat because that’s when Bexley blinded me with that smile of his,” I say, brushing a tear off Brayden’s face. “He saw you, and his face beamed, Bray.” Brayden squeezes my hand as tight as he can as he silently chokes on the continuous sobs that shake his body. “And that’s when he reached out and handed you the Nerds Rope,” I add after a pause. “He just wanted to give his brother a Nerds Rope after he finished training.” At these words, Brayden’s shoulders begin to shake uncontrollably, overwhelmed by a rush of sobs that he can no longer hold back. I slowly let go of his hand and wrap both arms around him, drawing him close until his tear-streaked face rests gently against my chest. I allow him some time to gather himself. The tremors slowly stop, and I feel him lift his head from my chest.

“Sorry,” he mumbles. His words are low and rough, as though each one carries the weight of his buried pain. “It’s still so raw—hearing those good things makes me happy, yet it cuts like broken glass every time.” I ease my arm away slowly, giving him space to sit up properly. He takes a deep, trembling breath before saying, “Continue, please.”

“Right after that moment, we became inseparable—best friends, really, as a group of four. But it was always you and Kal and me and Bex.” Bray’s sigh is heavy as he rolls his head back against the cool wall, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. “I always knew that what I felt for Bex was deeper than friendship. I held it inside, scared of losing him if I ever told it.” I pause for a moment, the memory of his unexpected kiss flooding back. “Then, one day, when we were fifteen, you and Kal were at the rink while I stayed behind at the trailer with Bex. Out of nowhere, he kissed me.” I stop, watching Bray for a reaction; his silence gives me the courage to continue. “It was sudden—one minute, we were lying side by side, and the next, his lips were pressed against mine. He admitted he’d felt something for me for a long time, and in that moment, everything felt so right.”

Bray asks quietly, “How long were you two together?” I let out a shaky laugh. “That’s just it, Bray. I don’t think we ever really were together in the way you imagine—it was more like a friends-with-benefits situation. I don’t believe I ever truly mattered to Bex.” I lean forward to meet Bray’s eyes. “I don’t think he knew how long I’d waited for that kiss, how desperately I wanted him.” My frown deepens at the memory of him telling me we couldn’t continue with whatever it was between us, a moment when everything in my world seemed to crumble as I walked out of the trailer

door. “Then one day, just ten minutes after he said we couldn’t carry on as we were, it had to just be friends, I stepped out of the trailer and saw him—locked in an intense, almost desperate kiss with Daxton. Daxton’s glare over Bex’s shoulder was so piercing I couldn’t tell whether the fire burning in my chest was from sadness or rage.”

“Daxton, what?” Brayden springs off the bed and turns sharply to face me. “Bex and Daxton were never together like that, I swear—I asked him.” Brayden’s brow furrows, and his eyes sweep around the room as if he’s searching for something he might have missed or a detail Bex might have mentioned. “He would have told me. He wouldn’t have kept something like that from me.”

“I don’t know what happened between them,” I start, my voice shaky as I stare at the floor. “But I do know that was the last day I ever spoke to Bexley. He fucked me up, Bray. I still replay that day in my mind—reminding myself that we were just kids, and deep down, I had long forgiven him. But my pride kept me from rebuilding that bridge and then seeing the shit he wreaked on your life—the endless stress you carried—it brought up all my anger and made it impossible for me to let anything go.” My head bows, heavy with regret. “Now it feels too late to tell him that I forgave him for breaking my heart,” I murmur.

Brayden steps closer and drops himself down next to me again; his warmth wraps around me gently, as he slips his hands around my arms. “Look at me, Tray.” I lift my head slowly, meeting his bloodshot eyes that seem to plead for understanding. “It’s never too late to tell him,” he insists. “I talk to him every day, telling him that I still haven’t forgiven him for leaving me,” he admits, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. He pauses to take a deep, steadying breath before continuing, “But if you can find it in your heart to forgive Bex, then why not Daxton? Bex carried most of the blame.”

“You don’t understand, Bray,” I snap, my voice thick with hurt as I recall the memory. “The way Dax looked at me, his gaze fixed over Bexley’s shoulder—it burned with fire and searing heat like he could see my heart crumbling right there in his eyes. He loved it.” I push myself upright, the tension making my muscles twitch as Brayden instinctively shuffles sideways. “He not only took Bexley away from me, but he also seemed to savor every second of me crumbling.”

“Have you ever spoken to him about it?” He tilts his head as if weighing each of my words.

I fling my head back, disbelieving. “Talk to Daxton about him enjoying every moment of my misery?” Even to me, I sound bitter. “I’m good for that.”

Brayden’s expression turns sincere. “I might have the wrong end of the stick, Tray. I don’t know Daxton as well as Bex knew him, but Bex always spoke so well of him. From the few brief encounters I’ve had, I see someone good there—a person who, like Bexley, is caught in his own struggles.” His eyes soften with genuine concern as he pleads, “All I’m asking is that you take a step back with him. Just lay off him a bit. Please.”

“Okay.” I exhale, letting a long-held sigh escape as resignation fills my chest.

A small smile tugs at Brayden’s lips. “Thank you.”

“You don’t truly despise Daxton, Tray.”

I shake my head fiercely. “I do. I hate him so much.” I meet his steady gaze with a lifted chin. Brayden nods slowly.

“All right,” he concedes.

Later, we get into a lighter conversation about random shit—like Kal finally meeting a girl the other night, though he hasn’t told us any of the messy details. Unlike me and Bray. We share every dirty detail. Brayden stands up, letting me know he’s heading out. At the doorway, he pauses and turns back toward me.

“Tray, remember when you said, ‘I hate him?’ I know you better than you know yourself sometimes. I can spot a lie in you before you even recognize it yourself.” He smiles tightly at me as I process his words.

“That ‘I hate him.’ It was weak. You don’t hate him, no matter how much you want to.”

And then he’s gone. And all I can do is sit here and repeat to myself that I hate Daxton Rivers. Even if it does sound weaker and weaker the more I say it.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Trayton

Staring at Daxton's face, marred with those cuts and bruises that still linger, sends a surge of fury through my veins once again. The moment I arrived, the first words out of my mouth were, "Who did this to you?" But he just exhaled deeply, his eyes avoiding mine, and gestured for me to take a seat. I know it wasn't Grady—he wouldn't dare lay a finger on Daxton—and I can't bring myself to believe that Daxton had the audacity to go back to him that night. What the hell happened in those twelve hours between him walking out of my place and then stumbling into that locker room looking like this?

The tattoo gun buzzes incessantly as Daxton focuses intensely on inking the intricate design on my arm. His brow furrows in concentration. Meanwhile, all I can do is focus on him, my mind a whirlwind of emotions.

Anger. The kind that clenches your fists and sets your jaw tight.

Rage. A firestorm that threatens to consume everything in its path.

Sadness. A heavy weight that settles in the pit of my stomach.

Want. A strange pull that draws me toward him.

Need. A raw, aching desire that I can't seem to shake.

These are the emotions this guy stirs within me, and it infuriates me beyond measure. My conversation with Brayden last night dredged everything up to the surface again—all the reasons I despise Daxton.

I hate him—or at least, I think I do.

Why is it so easy to say I hate him when I'm not with him, yet when I'm with him, the words taste like a bitter lie on my tongue?

But why, then, do I find myself wanting him so desperately? Why does it fill me with anger to see him hurt when, once upon a time, that was all I ever wanted?

When did my hatred for him morph into this undeniable want and need?

When did the lines between hate and want blur so completely?

Was it when he wrapped his lips around me, igniting a fire I can't seem to extinguish?

When he first snapped back at me and called me a sewer? I don't even fucking know the moment it happened. All I know is that the hate still simmers beneath the surface, but it doesn't reach a full boil anymore. What churns within me is the need to see his eyes light up, the want to witness his smile spread across his face. The craving to hear him moan my name as I bury myself deep inside him.

"Stop clenching." Daxton sighs for the third time today. I can see he's mildly frustrated as he works the tattoo gun over my skin.

"Stop being you," I snap back without a second thought, my words sharp. It's typical for me—talk first, think later. Nailed it to a fucking *T*.

The buzzing of the tattoo gun halts as Daxton turns his head slightly to check if anyone else is in the room, but it's just the two of us. The bright glow of the overhead lights casts shadows across the walls.

"You can't punch me while I'm tattooing you, Tray," he says, a hint of amusement creeping into his statement.

"Who said I want to punch you?" I lean forward, a playful smirk spreading across my lips as I inch closer to him. "Who says I'm not holding myself back from jumping off this chair and pushing you to your knees so you can remind me how well you swallow me down?" Daxton's eyes flare with intensity, and the heat between us is palpable.

"Don't," he warns, his voice weak and raspy, betraying his resolve.

"How's your throat?" I ask, my smirk growing wider.

He doesn't respond with words, just a huff of air as he turns the tattoo gun back on. The buzzing noise fills the room once more as if it can dampen the undeniable spark that crackles between us. That heat that feels like it could burn through lead.

He reaches a sensitive spot on my arm, and a sharp hiss escapes my lips. I notice a small smirk playing on his lips before he continues his work with

the tattoo needle. The buzzing fills the room again.

“You enjoy seeing me in pain, Quiet Boy?” I ask, meeting his eyes. His jaw clenches tightly. I watch as the dark depths of midnight return to his eyes, swallowing the green that was there moments ago. It’s clear—he likes it. “What do you want to do to me right now, Daxton?” I whisper. He pauses, setting the tattoo gun on the table with a deliberate thud before standing up.

“Strangle you, honestly. Now let me finish this,” he replies, turning his back on me as though that will hide the way he tucks himself up. But I know better. I’ve had to hide my own reactions countless times.

“Does it turn you on, seeing me in pain?” I ask, pushing further.

“You manage that just by being you,” he murmurs, running his fingers through his hair with a heavy sigh. He doesn’t turn back immediately, and I can’t quite say where this surge of boldness comes from. Max, or anyone, could walk through the door any second, but the want is too overwhelming. I’m hard as a rock, my need undeniable.

With a quick motion, I undo my jeans, freeing my aching erection from my boxer shorts. My right arm remains resting on the table where Daxton was working. I begin to stroke myself, the sensation electric.

“Daxton,” I groan, the name escaping my lips like a plea.

He spins around abruptly, his eyes widening with shock as they dart to the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” he hisses, unable to tear his gaze away from the rhythmic motion of my hand.

“Taking care of this.” I moan, my hand moving rapidly, the friction driving me nearly over the edge.

“Trayton, stop.” Daxton’s feeble plea makes me chuckle under my breath.

“Finish the tattoo, Dax,” I insist, slowing the pace of my hand, desire pooling in my gut. A need to release tightens every muscle. When did being near him start affecting me like this?

“Trayton,” Daxton growls, his eyes glued to my hard dick pumping in my hand, an involuntary lick of his lips betraying his interest.

“Daxton,” I growl back, the tension thick between us. “Finish the tattoo,” I demand, squeezing the head of my cock as pre-cum beads onto my fingertips.

“Max could walk in at any minute,” he warns, yet his gaze remains fixed on me, a mix of fear and heat in his eyes. I can see he’s thinking about the

other night, just as I can't shake the memory of how he felt around me.

"Daxton," I snap, and he finally sits, ripping off his gloves and putting on a fresh pair before picking up the tattoo gun with a deep, grounding breath.

"You're making it hard to concentrate, Trayton," he complains, eyes tracing the outline inked into my arm.

"Well, you infuriate me," I counter, frustration edging every word. "This is what you do to me, Daxton. Now finish the damn tattoo so I can get out of here."

The instant the needle pricks my skin, I groan, and a moan escapes Daxton's lips. He pauses again, drawn to my hand.

"Trayton," Daxton whispers, and it's my undoing. Spasms rack my body as I fall over the edge, the release surging through me. I stifle a groan, letting it rumble deep in my throat as I press my head back into the seat and close my eyes. When I open them, Daxton is transfixed by the aftermath; his eyes burn into me with an intensity that leaves me breathless.

I growl "Finish" through clenched teeth. His hands tremble slightly as he swiftly complies, the tattoo gun buzzing. I shove my dick back into my pants, leaving the fly gaping. My fingers rake through the warm, sticky mess spreading across my shirt. I hold them up, two glistening digits, and shove them under Daxton's nose. His eyes flicker, but he doesn't pause his work. The needle keeps drilling into my arm. I trace his lips, slick and salty.

"Taste me." The words escape my lips as a low hiss. Daxton parts his, just enough for me to push my fingers inside. His tongue twists, hot and wet, lapping up every drop. The tattoo gun eases as his eyes flutter closed, a low moan vibrating around my fingers. He sucks, licks, slurps, his breath hitching.

It's fucked. It's fucking hot. I'm drowning in it.

I must be insane to jerk myself off while the tattoo needle's biting into me. But this is Daxton's doing. I couldn't wait, not with his wild eyes burning into me. I needed a release right then, right there.

"You like that, baby?" I rasp. Daxton's eyes roll back, lids shuttering as he nods, still sucking on my fingers like a starving man.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I carefully pull my fingers free from Daxton's mouth, and he exhales deeply, his head drooping as if in defeat. After a moment, he seems to pull himself together. He places a few paper towels on my chest to clean me up. His eyes slowly lift but never quite meet mine, like he's determined to

pretend that nothing just happened. With a focused calm, he resumes working on the tattoo, the buzzing needle filling the silence between us.

As he works, my mind crackles with tension, unable to look away from him. I memorize every contour of his face, the way his brow furrows in concentration, the curve of his lips that I can't shake from my thoughts. The memory of how those lips felt against me, the way they wrapped around the head of my cock, sends a fresh wave of desire coursing through me.

I can't help but wonder what those lips would taste like, what flavor lies beneath his skin. A frustrated urge bubbles up inside me. "Are you done?" My voice is sharp. I need to leave before I do something reckless, like claim those lips as mine, capture every moan that might escape them, or tear away his tight jeans and take him right here on the spot.

"Let me wrap it," he says, weary from the day, as if the weight of this tension is wearing on him too.

I sit restlessly, my leg bouncing with nervous energy as he carefully wraps the fresh tattoo. His fingers brush against my arm, and a shiver of goose bumps races across my skin, electrifying my senses.

My heart is in a relentless sprint, a wild drumbeat echoing in my chest. Being near him has me unraveling, my body and mind in chaos over this intense craving I've never felt for anyone before. I fear I might burst if I don't have him in every way I imagine.

I need to escape his presence. "Finished?"

"Yep," he replies, his irritation evident. "You're so fucking hot and cold, Trayton. Be one way or the other; I can't deal with you being like this," he snaps, frustration cracking through his calm facade.

I spring up from the seat, grabbing him by the neck with a firm grip, my teeth clenched.

His cologne wafts through the air, a mix of cedar and citrus but also spice that makes my heart race. I shouldn't have let myself get this close, but here I am, drawn in by an invisible force.

"I can't fucking stand you," I spit, jaw clenched. "Every time you walk into a room, my blood boils. Every time you're near me, I want to scream. But damn it, I can't stop thinking about you." The words tumble out, raw and unbidden, as I silently curse myself for revealing the truth.

He meets my gaze, his eyes dark with an intensity that matches my own. "You think you're the only one? You drive me fucking insane. I hate how much I want you."

I release my grip on his neck, my eyes tracing the contours of his face, every line and shadow that makes him infuriatingly irresistible. “You can’t want me,” I whisper, the words barely escaping my lips. I turn on my heel, leaving the shop and allowing the door to swing shut behind me.

No one can want me. No one can fall for me because I’ll never return it.

Everyone always leaves.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Trayton

One week later

A week without him was supposed to be a relief, a chance to clear my head, but it turns out to be anything but. He consumes my thoughts—every little detail of him is etched permanently in my mind. I've reached a point where I can't decide if I want to let go of these thoughts or not. He mentioned to Cope that he'd be holed up in the library all week, trying to catch up. So what did I do? I haunted that library every day, desperate for even a fleeting glimpse of him, even if only from afar. It oddly soothed some turmoil within me. It's fucked.

Despite knowing he was in the library, each time the locker room door swung open, I couldn't help but hope it was him stepping through. I'm aware he'll come today, and every time the door creaks, it's an intense struggle not to turn around and look, torn between hope and restraint.

Then, just moments ago, I heard it again: the door opening. I sense his presence, my whole being suddenly alight, as if on fire. I feel certain it's him this time; the sensation is unmistakable as the hairs on my neck stand up, my skin prickling with anticipation. My body seems to have its own awareness, recognizing his nearness.

I finally allow myself to look, a knot forming in my stomach. His eyes are shadowed, and a rugged five-o'clock shadow lines his jaw—yes, it's undeniably attractive, but it's wrong. It's not the Daxton I know. He's always clean-shaven, *always*.

He stands there, shoulders sagging and dark circles clinging beneath his eyes like storm clouds as if he hasn't known a proper night's sleep in days.

His gaze locks onto mine, and I see nothing but raw, unfiltered sadness. Cope strides over, slapping him on the shoulder. Daxton's eyes reluctantly break away from mine.

Just then, Daxton's phone erupts in a shrill ring, and I notice the tension ripple through his body, his shoulders growing stiff as a board. Cope's brow furrows in concern, but Daxton just shakes his head, muting the phone and slipping it back into his pocket.

Once we hit the ice, I skate directly to Cope, urgency in my stride. "What's going on?" I press, unable to shake the unease.

"Not much, bro, you?" he responds casually, lowering himself to the floor to begin his routine stretches.

"No, I mean with him," I clarify, nodding subtly at Daxton, who's sitting in the bleachers like he always does.

Cope releases a heavy sigh, glancing over at Daxton with a look that speaks volumes. "I can't say," he mumbles.

"Yes, you can," I insist, my frustration bubbling to the surface.

Cope's eyes meet mine, turning steely. "No, I can't. He's my friend, and I promised I wouldn't say anything to anyone."

"I'm your friend too."

"Yes, and I have other friends, Tray. Leave it," Cope snaps back, standing up and skating away, leaving me teetering on the edge of losing my goddamn shit.

I shift my focus back to Daxton, whose eyes are locked onto mine, filled with a haunting sadness and a vulnerability that practically screams for help. Frustration gnaws at me as I shake my head, exhaling deeply before diving into the training session.

M

Stay in the lockers after everyone has left.

Quiet Boy:

Why?

M

Because I said so.

The rink is nearly empty as I glide across the ice, the chill biting at my cheeks. The echo of my skates against the frozen surface is the only sound in the vast arena. Everyone else has already gone back to the lockers, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I push myself harder, the muscles in my legs burning with each stride, hoping the energy will remove Daxton from my mind. But with every powerful stroke and every sharp slap of the puck, his image lingers stubbornly.

Eventually, I slow, my breath clouding in the crisp air. I skate off the ice and remove my skates, allowing my pounding heart to calm. By the time I've got back to the locker room, I notice all the team has left. Relief washes over me when I see Daxton still there, sitting on the bench with his sketch pads and pens scattered around him. His eyes lift to meet mine, a flicker of curiosity mixed with fatigue.

"What did you want?" he asks, his voice lacking its usual edge.

"You." I breathe out, my heart racing as I move closer, pulling him to his feet and backing him into the cold metal lockers. My fingers press against his temple, my frustration boiling over.

"*You*"—I jab a finger against his head—"are in my mind too damn much, and I hate it." My body trembles with intensity as I tap my finger against my head. "In here, all the damn time." Daxton's eyes widen in surprise, his face a portrait of shock as if I've gone mad. This is all his doing though. He does this to me.

"What are you doing to me, Daxton?" I whisper, my gaze drifting to his lips. His eyes, still wide, lock onto mine before dropping his gaze to my lips. And I know we are on the brink.

I understand that the moment I taste him, there will be no turning back. I will be completely undone.

"Don't," I grit out through clenched teeth, holding onto the last bit of resolve I have. My hands are balled into fists in Daxton's shirt, knuckles white. "Don't you fucking dare." Daxton gulps, his Adam's apple bobbing as his eyes remain focused on my lips. His breaths come in heavy, ragged

waves, each exhale brushing against the fabric of my jersey as his chest rises and falls with intensity. “You fucking infuriate me,” I growl, feeling the heat of anger coiling in my stomach like a live wire. “Every word you say is like a match to gasoline.” My eyes lock onto his, and I see something flicker there, a momentary shift, like the flick of a lighter in the dark.

“And yet, you keep coming back for more. Just admit it, Tray, you love the burn.” He’s taunting me with his whispers that send shivers down my spine.

“I don’t like you. I fucking hate you,” I say, but I falter, the truth undeniable. He’s right. I love it all. I love the way desire ignites within me, scorching and consuming.

“I hate you too,” he lies, a tangled mess of contradictions. The tension between us snaps like an overstretched rubber band.

“Fuck you, Daxton.”

Then it’s fireworks. Every possible firework explodes inside me as I crash my lips against his. His lips are both impossibly soft and fiercely demanding as they move against mine, a clash of passion and fury. Daxton’s tongue slides against mine, igniting a wildfire that rages through my veins. Right now, I don’t fucking care if the world burns around us; as long as I have Daxton’s lips on mine in the final moments, nothing else matters. He’s addictive in every sense of the word.

His fingers thread through my hair, pulling me closer, as a deep, guttural moan escapes him, vibrating through me. I moan back, the sound mingling with his, a symphony of raw need. Our teeth clash, our lips bruise, and our tongues dance in a desperate, greedy rhythm, each swipe leaving us craving more. His lip ring rubs against my lips, causing me to realize and really let it sink in. It’s him. I’m kissing Daxton Rivers. I run my tongue over his lip ring, causing another moan to rise up his throat. I swallow it whole.

It’s never felt like this, and right now, it feels too good to even question how something could feel this amazing. I’m drowning in sensation, lost in the taste of him. Daxton’s lips are like a fire against mine, burning away every doubt, every fear. His hands tangle in my hair, tugging just enough to send shivers down my spine. I press closer, desperate to feel more of him. My hands run over the muscled ripples on his back.

The world narrows to just us—the heat of his body, the urgency of his touch. I breathe him in, all spice and sweat and something uniquely Daxton. It’s intoxicating. My fingers trace the hard planes of his chest, feeling his heart racing beneath my palm.

We break apart, gasping for air. Daxton's eyes are wild, pupils blown wide with desire. His lips are swollen and bright red, hair mussed from my fingers. He's never looked more beautiful.

"I…" he begins, his voice gravelly with emotion. But the words seem to escape him as he pulls me into an embrace once more. His tongue invades my mouth.

It's wild.

It's sloppy.

It's messy.

It's rough

But it's so damn perfect.

His teeth sink into my lips as he bites hard, and I take the lead, guiding him with a determined urgency to where I want him. As I do, I start to strip off my gear, ensuring my lips never break contact with his. I need his lips like I need air right now.

My fingers clumsily work at his belt buckle, trembling with impatience, but he suddenly snaps back to reality. He pulls back.

"Wha—what are you doing?" He gasps, his breath coming in short, uneven bursts. Blood stains his lips and chin. I wipe my finger against my lip, catching the blood from where he bit me.

"I need you right fucking now," I growl, my voice a low, urgent rumble as I tug at his shirt. It's then that he realizes where I've moved him.

The showers.

Daxton hastily tears at the remainder of his clothes as I pull the rest of mine off quicker than I think I ever have done, and I push him into a shower stall. I twist the knob, and the shower sputters to life, the initial blast of cold water hitting us like shards of ice. Yet neither of us flinches. The water streams down, slicking Daxton's dark hair against his forehead. His eyes, intense and smoldering with desire, meet mine, and I find myself unable to look away. The chill of the shower fades as a different kind of warmth blossoms between us, steam rising in tendrils from our skin.

I press him against the cool, slick tiles, my hands exploring the contours of his lean muscles. Each touch sends jolts of electricity through me. His artistic fingers trace intricate patterns across my back, igniting trails of fire wherever they pass. I shiver, but not from the cold.

"Dax," I whisper against his neck, inhaling his scent deeply before letting my tongue glide up his skin. The taste of him mingling with the water is intoxicating. It's overwhelming.

In response, he pulls me closer, our bodies melding together as soft lips capture mine again. I glide my tongue over his lips, collecting my blood. My hands wander lower, and Daxton gasps into my mouth as I wrap my hand around his dick. Suddenly, I pause. I pull back from Daxton, eyes wide with surprise, and glance down. There, a silver hoop protrudes from the head of his dick. I step back slightly, staring in fascination at how it pierces through, entering at the top and emerging at the bottom, curving around.

Daxton breathes heavily, his chest rising and falling, as I stand there, holding his dick as if it were a fucking masterpiece.

I mean, it pretty much is. The air is thick with steam, and my eyes are drawn to the metal glinting on the thick, rigid cock that's leaking like it's got an endless supply. I reach out, swipe my thumb over the slick tip, and bring it to my lips, craving his fucking taste like it's the antidote to a poison.

"Shit." Daxton gasps, his body jerking as if he's been shocked.

"You taste just as good as I imagined, Dax," I growl. I'm hoarse with lust. He whimpers as I rub my thumb over the cool metal of his piercing, his body trembling like a leaf in a storm. I trail my fingers down the thick veins that pulse along his dick, feeling the heat of him, the silkiness of his skin. Fuck, his cock is like a work of art. My hand moves down, cupping his heavy, full balls before giving them a gentle squeeze, causing him to gasp again.

"Turn around for me, Dax. Press your chest to the wall, and spread those cheeks for me." I smirk, and he nods eagerly, turning to face the cold, wet tiles. He grips his ass, fingers digging into the firm flesh, and pulls open, presenting himself to me like a fucking gift.

"Fucking hell. Look at you." I groan, the words ripped from my throat. I kneel behind him, push his hands away, and my fingers dig into his ass cheeks, spreading them wide. His hole pulses, begging to be licked, and I dive in, not wasting time. My balls are drawn up tight, aching with the need for release, but I don't want to rush this with Daxton. I flatten my tongue and lap at his hole, savoring every whimper and whine that echoes off the tiles. I feel the tremble in his legs as I stiffen my tongue and push into his tight heat.

"Trayton." He purrs my name like a prayer, over and over. I moan into his heat, the sound of my name on his lips making me fucking feral. I need to be inside him. Now. I stand up and spit on his hole once, twice, three times, then push two fingers into him, urgent and demanding, as I scissor my digits over and over until he's a moaning mess. I don't have time to be gentle. I feel like I might die if I'm not inside him within the next twenty seconds. The water

cascading down our bodies helps, and I line my aching cock up with his hole. “I’m clean,” I whisper.

Daxton gasps and then nods. “Me too.”

“I’m not being gentle, Daxton,” I rasp. I barely recognize myself.

“I don’t want you to be gentle,” he snaps. He’s breathless and desperate, like he needs me just as much as I need him.

I swallow hard, my throat constricting as I slowly push the head of my cock inside him. The water is still warm. The tiles are slick beneath my feet as I slide in one inch, then two, then three. Daxton’s breath hitches, his body tensing as I drag my tongue up the curve of his neck, pushing myself a fraction deeper. A low, guttural moan escapes his throat, resonating through his back and into my chest.

“Remember, I hate you. I just want to fuck you,” I whisper, my desire making me hoarse.

“Then hate me and fuck me,” he growls.

I thrust into him, hard and deep, then pull back; the water cascades off his shoulders and runs like a stream down his back.

“Fuckkkkk,” Daxton all but screams, his voice echoing off the shower walls, the sound of the shower almost drowning him out. I thrust into him again, then pause, my eyes closing as I savor the tight, pulsating heat wrapped around me. Daxton’s breath comes in ragged, desperate pants, his body trembling against mine, the water flowing over the flames between us. I could stay in this moment forever.

“Move,” he demands, his low rumble of impatience evident as he pushes back against me, his body begging for more. My fingers dig into his hips, hard enough to leave marks. I grit my teeth and start a punishing rhythm; the sound of wet skin slapping against wet skin echoes off the tile walls, mingling with our grunts and moans.

Steam begins to rise around us, the water slowly warming, and I can taste the salt of his skin on my lips. Daxton braces one hand against the shower tiles, his fingers splayed wide, the other reaching back to tangle in my hair. He yanks hard, pulling my head down to his shoulder. I bite down on the curve of his neck, the sweet sting of his skin between my teeth, my tongue licking at the indentations I leave behind.

“Harder,” he demands; he’s utterly wrecked with desperation. My stomach clenches, my balls drawing up tight at the raw need in his tone. Ragged breaths leave me as I moan his name over and over, the sound vibrating

through my chest. I can't get enough of him. He feels too fucking good. Too fucking right.

"Can you feel how much I hate you?" I hiss, hating how fucking amazing he feels squeezing my cock right now. His hand slides down the tiles, his fingers scraping against the grout. "Tray, Tray, Tray." He repeats it like a mantra of need as he wraps his hand around his dick, and he begins pumping furiously, his body chasing its release.

His breath hitches, a desperate gasp. "Don't stop, Tray. Please, right there." His fingers curl against the slick tiles as his knuckles go pale.

I lean in, my words a low rumble against his ear. "You're not so quiet now, are you? Not when my dick is buried deep in your ass." His moans increase, echoing off the walls, and I know he's teetering on the edge. My hips slap against his ass, each thrust punctuated by a grunt from deep within my chest. "Come for me, Daxton," I growl, my lips brushing his earlobe. "Show me how much you love my cock buried deep inside you."

His body convulses, every muscle tensing. "ShitfuckTray!" His cry is a jumbled mess of pleasure. His head lolls forward, forehead pressing against the cold tiles.

"Fuck yes," I roar, slamming into him once, twice, then stilling. My body goes taut, every nerve alight with euphoria. I come hard, filling him, and it feels like it goes on forever. Daxton's moans continue to reverberate through the showers, his body milking me for all I'm worth.

We stand there, panting, as the water washes over us. My forehead rests against the back of his neck, my arms wrapped around his waist. I can feel his heart pounding, matching the frantic rhythm of my own.

Slowly, reality starts to seep back in. The chill of the water, the hard tile beneath our feet, the ache in my muscles. But I can't bring myself to let go of him just yet.

Daxton shifts, turning in my arms to face me as my dick slips out, causing me to groan again from the tenderness. His eyes are wide, pupils still blown with desire. A mix of emotions flickers across his face—confusion, wonder, fear. I'm sure my expression mirrors his.

"Tray," he whispers, voice hoarse. "What… what was that?"

I swallow with difficulty, my throat tight as I struggle to find the right words. "I don't know," I finally confess. My hand instinctively rises to touch his face, but then I let it fall, retreating a step backward, distancing myself.

His expression shifts abruptly, turning cold and unyielding. "That didn't feel like you hate me."

“But I do.” *I don’t.* “And you hate me,” I follow up.

“I do,” he whispers. *He doesn’t.* His words falter and uncover his vulnerability.

The silence stretches between us. Water continues to pour over our bodies, but I barely notice it anymore. My eyes are fixed on Daxton’s face, searching for something—anything—that might give away what he’s really thinking. But his expression is a mask and unreadable.

“We should go,” I mutter, reaching behind him to turn off the shower. The sudden absence of sound is deafening.

Daxton nods, not meeting my eyes. He moves to step out of the stall, but I catch his wrist. The touch sends a jolt through me, and I see him flinch.

“Wait. What happened this week? Why do you look like you haven’t slept in days?”

His eyes finally meet mine, and the sadness I saw earlier is back, mixed with something else. Anger? Uncertainty?

“It doesn’t concern you.” He brushes past me once again, and this time, I don’t push it.

I let him go.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Daxton

Naturally, he shut himself off right after we had that mind-blowing sex. The moment I turned around in his arms and noticed the change in his eyes, I knew. They went from soft and tender to cold and distant, and I knew he would pull away. Then he had the nerve to look at me with those detached eyes and ask why I looked so terrible. What a jerk.

I've been avoiding him all week. Every time I pass him in the hallway, my heart races, and I want to scream, grab him, and kiss him with all the passion I still feel. But I can't because he despises me, and I'm supposed to despise him too. But the truth is, I don't. Yet it seems like the only thing that makes him content is us hating each other, as if our animosity is the glue that holds his world together.

Am I really such a joke to him that he can't let go of this supposed hatred? The reasons he claims to hate me are as flimsy as paper and nonexistent. "It's your fault," I shout at the grave in front of me, glaring down at the weathered plaque that shows Bexley's name. The cemetery is eerily quiet, the only sound the rustling of leaves in the wind. I hate that I've come here out of anger, with my fists clenched and my chest tight.

"Why did you ask me to keep that secret? I'm so close to telling him, Bex, but how can I? After everything you've done for me, how can I betray you like that?" Tears stream down my face, hot and unrelenting. "Why can't you be here right now, helping me with this? I hate you for leaving me," I

sob, my voice breaking. “I hate you.” But deep down, I know I don’t. I never have and never will truly hate Bex.

“Why wouldn’t you talk to me? Tell me what was wrong. I could have helped. We could have fixed it. I would have been there.” I murmur the final words as the pain becomes too much to bear. I’ve stood here saying these lines before, hoping that if I spoke them, somehow I’d get answers.

“We had a plan. We were leaving. We were going to run away from everything, and then you left me behind. You left me alone to face it all.” I collapse to my knees, the dirt biting into me. “Please, come back. I need you so damn much.” I lower myself onto my elbows, my head bowed as the weight of it all crashes over me.

I was slowly moving on, sorting through my own mess, when the one person I never needed stormed in and shattered everything.

“What do I do, Bex? You’re the only one who understands.”

“What secret?” I stiffen as I catch the last of my sobs. Still kneeling in the dirt, I glance over my shoulder. There stands Brayden, suspicion in his eyes, holding a small bag of candy.

“A secret,” I reply.

Brayden steps closer and stops right in front of me. “You’re going to tell me this secret, Daxton. Now.” His voice is sharp, and I knew he wanted to learn everything about his brother.

“Bray, I can’t,” I whisper. “Bex made me promise to keep it hidden since we were sixteen.”

“Who was it about?” he asks, taking a seat beside me. I look at him briefly before turning my eyes back to the plaque.

“I can’t say.”

“Daxton.”

“Bray, it has nothing to do with you, I swear.” I wince as I speak. “Please don’t force me to tell you.” I stare down at the grave. “I’ve kept my promise all these years.”

“Just tell me who it’s about, and I won’t ask any more questions.”

“Even if you know who it is?”

Brayden falls silent for a moment, his shoulders slumping. “Yes. Even if I know.”

I sigh deeply, gazing into the distance. “Trayton,” I finally say. I hear Brayden take a deep breath, and when I glance at him, he stares down at the plaque and nods.

“Is this secret holding you back from something?” Brayden’s persistent voice cuts through the air.

“You said no more questions,” I reply, my eyes narrowing as I shoot him a sharp glance.

He shrugs, a defiant smirk playing on his lips. “I lied.”

I can’t help but laugh, shaking my head in disbelief. “You and Bex really are the definition of twins. He used to pull that on me all the time.”

Brayden’s smile falters, and a shadow briefly darkens his face. “I love him so damn much, but sometimes I think he didn’t deserve you as a friend. You were, and still are, so good to him. I really fucking hope he appreciated it because he changed a lot over the last few years.” His voice cracks, a tremor barely contained.

I nod, the memories pressing down on me. Bex messed me up more than once because I refused to give him drugs. He lashed out at me at least once a week, his anger sharp and biting, and even ditched me to hang with Marley because, well, that’s where the drugs were.

But the good days with Bex always outshone the bad. He had an addiction. I’d never hold that against him.

“So, is this secret holding you back, then?” Brayden persists, steady and unyielding.

“Kinda but, more…” I trail off, the words catching in my throat.

“Trayton,” Brayden concludes, his gaze piercing through the silence.

I remain silent, the air between us thick with unspoken truths.

“A word of advice, Dax.” Brayden is serious and unwavering. “If Bex were a true friend, he wouldn’t want you clinging to a secret that’s potentially hurting people. And another thing—as his brother, his twin, I know for a fact he wouldn’t want you holding on to this.”

Brayden stands, reaching into his pocket and tossing a pack of peanut butter cups onto the gravestone with a soft thud.

“Keep my bro company for a little while, please.” He pauses, towering over me, his presence a mix of concern and determination. “I didn’t plan on coming today, but I was in the store, and that bag of peanut butter cups fell at my feet. It felt like a sign that I needed to be here for a reason. Now I’m convinced it was a sign. I needed to be here to tell you that Tray needs to know whatever you’re holding back.”

And with that, he turns and walks away, leaving me alone to grasp the weight of his words. The pack of peanut butter cups lies there like it’s

mocking me.

I tear open the orange package, the crinkling sound breaking the silence of the cemetery. Gently, I place a single candy on the cold, granite gravestone before popping another into my mouth. The familiar taste of peanut butter and chocolate brings a rush of memories, taking me back to those lazy afternoons when we sprawled on my bed, sharing secrets and candy.

“Was that a sign, Bex?” I whisper into the stillness, hoping for some kind of answer. “Did you send your brother to find me?”

The dilemma churns within me as I think about Tray. Should I tell the truth of what happened that day?

Should I tell Tray that the kiss meant nothing to either of us?

My heart aches with the weight of unspoken words. Do I confess that, in that fleeting moment, all I wished for was to be kissing him instead?

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Daxton

After talking with Bex, I felt the urge to take a walk. Usually, visiting him helps clear up the chaos in my mind, but this time, it didn't work. Instead, I ended up with more unanswered questions, feeling even more unsettled than before.

So here I am, standing in front of my old trailer door. Nothing has changed—absolutely nothing. This realization should make me turn around and leave, but I find myself unable to move. It feels like Bexley somehow led me here, like a twisted sign. I left the graveyard without a second thought, and instead of heading back to my dorm, my feet brought me here. Home.

I glance over at Bexley's trailer and then take in the bare landscape around the park. Everything here is lifeless, every single thing.

Before I can stop myself, I find myself walking toward Bexley's trailer. I stand at the door, possibly avoiding seeing my dad, but I just want to check if Bex's mom is still alive. I start to knock but hesitate—I've never knocked before, so why start now?

I open the door, expecting the usual smell, but there's none. As I step inside, I notice it's somewhat clean, which is surprising. On the sofa lies an even frailer version of Bex and Bray's mom. She looks terrible—it's shocking how drugs can slowly destroy a person from the inside out.

Looking over the kitchen, I'm puzzled by its cleanliness. It was never this tidy, not even when Bex lived here, and he always tried his best to keep it clean.

I walk over to the fridge to see if there's any food, and I find three containers with ready-made meals. What the heck? Who is doing this?

As I close the fridge door, I hear a groan behind me. I turn to see Bex's mom stirring, her eyes fluttering open as she frowns.

"Bex, baby, is that you?" A lump forms in my throat. "Bex," she murmurs, still half asleep.

"Go back to sleep, Mom," I whisper, watching as she slowly drifts off again. Bex had always shared stories about his mom—she wasn't always like this. There was a time when she was a good mom, not an addict.

Bex understood the craving for drugs too well; he had days when he would have sacrificed anything to get them. He related to his mom in a way Brayden couldn't.

I glance at the door, the one I had entered to find my best friend receiving CPR from his twin. Tears roll down my face as I stare at the bedroom door, and every part of me wants to avoid it. I run out of the trailer, feeling an overwhelming sense of suffocation, like someone is physically gripping my throat. Why did I even come here?

I head over to my old trailer. I know I have to go inside; maybe it will keep Marley off my back, but I have no idea how he'll react or what mood he'll be in. I haven't told anyone I'm here.

Taking a deep breath to calm my racing heart, I open the door and step in. Unlike Bex's trailer, this one reeks, making my eyes water.

What happened here? Beer cans cover the floor, dirt is everywhere, and food is dropped all over.

I glance around the living room, which is a complete mess—spilled drinks, food stains, trash bags overflowing with rotten garbage. The overpowering stench of urine makes me step outside for a moment before continuing. I take a few deep breaths, using the sweater—actually Tray's, which he lent me at the ice rink—to cover my face as I re-enter.

"Dad," I call out through the trailer.

No response.

I step over the trash and head to his bedroom door. As I open it, the smell assaults my senses, hitting my eyes before reaching my nose.

Shit, this is bad. This is really bad.

My dad is sprawled out on his bed—bruised face, swollen features, and a stomach bigger than I've ever seen. His eyes suddenly widen as they lock onto me.

"It wasn't my fault," he says, his voice trembling with fear.

"What?" I ask, completely clueless about what he's talking about.

"Your uncle—it was him." His face twists in pain, and tears well up in his eyes. "I know. I know." He screams into the empty room, and I look around, only to find no one else there.

"Dad," I whisper softly. He begins muttering to himself, saying things I can't understand. "Dad," I repeat, but he doesn't even look at me, just continues staring at the wall with a blank expression, mumbling random words.

What has happened to him?

I step back, but he remains fixated on that same spot. I leave the trailer and eventually the park, my mind racing. I can't believe how, in just a few months, he's fallen so far. How did this happen? And what really went down? I know I should call Marley, but with everything that's happened today, I just want to crawl into bed.

"Oh shit, sorry," I say as I bump into someone on the walkway. I catch a glimpse of sandy-brown hair with blond tips—a look that's unusual for guys these days—which makes me pause as he lowers his head and tries to slip away.

"Ashton," I call out. This is my chance to finally find out what the fuck happened that night and why he left. After everything that's already gone wrong today, what's the harm in one more?

He turns to me, his expression more of a wince than anything else.

"Look," I say. "If you don't like me, that's fine, but can you at least tell me what the fuck happened that night? When did things go wrong? Or are you just a rude cunt?" I'm already done with today, and the more I look at his face, the angrier I get. I'm sick of walking on eggshells around people—they can kiss my fucking ass.

He glances around like he's plotting an escape. "For fuck's sake, just tell me," I snap.

"A guy approached me." He hesitates, and I'm confused—did some guy come up to ask him out, and he just bailed?

"Come on, spit it out."

"He told me you gave him chlamydia," he rushes out, wincing.

I stand there dumbfounded for a moment before bursting into laughter. It's one messed-up prank, and this is the reason I've practically been cleaning up the aftermath for a month because of some fucking lie.

I can't stop laughing, tears streaming down my face, as Ashton just stares at me, his eyebrows knitted together like I've completely lost my mind. "Did this guy give you a name?" I ask, finally managing to catch my breath and wipe my eyes.

"No," he replies, his frown deepening with concern and confusion.

"So you just trusted some random guy?" I press, raising an eyebrow as I try to make sense of the situation. He looks at me, hesitating for a moment as if weighing his words.

"Well, yeah. He seemed really upset when he told me," Ashton explains. "He knew your name too," he adds, as if that alone should justify his decision.

"What did he look like?" I ask, my curiosity piqued despite the growing unease in my chest.

"Tall, striking eyes… dark chocolate-brown hair, and quite muscular. Really handsome." Ashton describes the guy, his eyes distant as he recalls the encounter. My heart sinks like a stone thrown into a deep well.

"Is there anything else you remember about him?" I push, trying to keep my voice steady as I brace myself for his reply.

Ashton stands there, fingers tapping lightly against his chin, deep in thought. "Oh yeah, he had plastic wrap around one arm, like from a fresh tattoo," he finally says, snapping back to the present. I inhale sharply, my chest constricting, and a sickening churn starts in my stomach. I don't answer Ashton. Instead, I turn on my heel and walk away, my mind spinning.

"So it's not true, then?" he calls after me, visibly confused but showing signs of hope. But my anger is already boiling over.

"Go to hell," I shout back over my shoulder. I am shaking with fury. I can't believe Trayton did this. A vivid memory flashes through my mind—Trayton comforting me the next day, pulling me from that ice. All along, it was he who ruined my night. It was he who made me feel worthless.

Well, screw you, Trayton King. I yank my phone from my pocket, my fingers trembling as I re-download the dating app I had once sworn off. I need to get over him, to erase every trace of Trayton from my life, and

forget about the tangled mess with my dad. I need someone new, someone who will help me forget Trayton ever existed.

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Chapter Thirty

Trayton

M

What you doin?

I fix my eyes on the screen, anticipating the little bubbles that will show Daxton is typing. I'm not entirely sure why I'm messaging him at this moment. I just can't seem to get him out of my head. There's this overwhelming craving for him that I can't shake. I don't even know when this shifted. When did I stop despising him? And when did I turn into someone who can't stop thinking about him? Here I am, on a Saturday night, unable to stop obsessing over a guy I'm supposed to hate. I see the two ticks turn blue, yet there's no reply. I wait for a few more minutes, growing more impatient. Five minutes pass, and there's still no response. Daxton Rivers just left me on read. Seriously? I sit here fuming, wondering what the hell is going on. Then I remember—I've still got his location linked to mine. I open the app and am surprised to see he's at some bar in the city. Why is he there? It's a half-hour drive from campus. "Kal," I say, still staring at the flashing dot.

"Yo."

"Where's Cope tonight?"

"No idea, probably in his dorm. We've got an early morning 10K run tomorrow," he answers, yawning. Ah, the thrilling life of being single and in our twenties. I then type out another message, this time to Cope.

M

What you doin?

I sit there again, waiting for the blue ticks or typing bubbles, but nothing appears. Cope hasn't read my message, even after ten minutes. I switch back to the tracker app and watch that annoying dot flash at the bar. If Cope went out, he'd have mentioned it. He would have invited us. We never go out without asking each other to join. We're a team both on and off the ice. It's always been that way. "I'm going to the store. Do you want anything?" I ask Kal, sitting at the edge of my bed while tying my sneakers.

"Erm, get me something sweet." He never wants anything, and the one time I'm not actually going to the store, he requests something. For crying out loud. "Sure." I'll just say I forgot when I return. I pull on my sweatshirt, open the door, and close it quietly behind me. I check the time—it's ten. If they've gone out for some kind of guys' night without us, I'm going to be pissed.

What if it's more than that? Cope always claimed he was straight, but what if things changed for him? First, he roomed with Brayden and saw more than he expected. Now he's rooming with Daxton.

He became close to Daxton quickly and is overly protective of him.

What if it's more? What if there's something between them, and I was just a placeholder for Daxton, something to pass the time?

No way.

Nope.

My mind needs to stop this shit. That's not what's happening. Daxton doesn't look at Cope the way he looks at me. His eyes don't undress Cope like they do with me during every training session. I noticed how he looked at me in the showers yesterday. There's no one else. I leave my dorm and rush across campus to Cope and Daxton's place. The campus is unusually quiet for a Saturday night—typical since no one here is as dull as we are. Everyone else is out doing what normal college students do. But as an athlete, I have to prioritize certain things, even though we still manage to have our nights out. I take the stairs two at a time, hurrying up to the third floor, and when I reach the door, I knock a few times, not really expecting anyone to answer because, well, they're probably out. Instead, a tired-looking Cope opens the door in his boxer shorts.

"Tray, what's up?" he asks, his eyes adjusting to the bright corridor light as he rubs them. For a moment, I stand there, lost for words—damn, I didn't expect him to be here. "Uh, just checking in," I manage to say, although it sounds as lame as it feels.

Cope raises an eyebrow. “Uh, all good,” he replies, glancing around in general confusion. “Do you want to come in or something?”

“Yes,” I blurt out too quickly, almost eagerly, because now I’m thinking Daxton might be in bed behind that door, maybe he’s even lost his phone. As the door opens, my eyes immediately dart to the side of the room where Brayden used to sleep, his bed now neatly made and untouched. Who the hell is he with at that bar? I already sense that Cope suspects I’m here because of Daxton. He always catches me glancing his way and has noted how often I ask about him, so I can’t come right out and ask. I know he wouldn’t judge me—nobody on the team would—but who can I explain this messed-up feeling to when I barely understand it myself? So I continue playing the game of disliking him because that’s all I’ve ever known about Daxton Rivers.

I sit down on Daxton’s bed and immediately get caught in his scent. It isn’t anything fancy, just a warm, comforting smell that feels like what I imagine home would smell like. Safe and comforting.

Damn, this isn’t good. That unsettling feeling returns; I can’t bear it—it’s like a broken bond screaming out for him, desperate to see him, to touch him. “Tray.” Cope’s voice breaks through my inner turmoil, pulling me out of my state—I can’t even tell what my mind or body is doing right now.

“Mm?” I look up at him.

“You good?” His brow is furrowing as he takes me in.

“Yeah, shit, sorry,” I say, trying to piece myself together.

“So, what’s up?” Cope asks, studying me as if trying to figure out why I’m here. “Why are you here?” He’s squinting slightly and tilting his head in curiosity.

“I messaged you, but you didn’t reply, so I thought I’d come over and see what you were up to.” I shrug, placing my hands on the bed behind me and leaning back slightly. My eyes wander over Daxton’s side of the room. It’s sparse—only a single poster hangs there, showing that prominent Ferris wheel in London. I know it’s London because the poster includes a sketch of that iconic clock, named after some guy called Ben. It’s a strange detail, if you ask me; maybe it’s a place he wants to visit.

“He drew it for Bex,” Cope says, and I glance at him as he stares at the picture. “That’s why Bohdi took Bray there—it was the one spot Bex always wanted to see.” I nod, though I don’t recall Bex ever mentioning that to me. Maybe he did. I’ve pretty much erased most of our conversations. “No roommate tonight?” It seems like the natural moment to ask. Cope gives me a

smirk as though he's just realized exactly why I'm here, and I do my best not to let it show.

"He's out." He settles back on his bed, leaning against the wall with his legs dangling off the side, hands resting in his lap as he looks at me like the cat who got the cream.

"Anywhere fun?" I ask. Cope's eyes widen, and he nods, biting his cheek to hold back a laugh he clearly wants to let out.

"Oh, I'm sure he's somewhere fun; he's definitely having a great time." He pauses before adding, "If you know what I mean." Cope stretches both arms upward. "After all, the guy who asked him out made it pretty clear he wasn't looking for a relationship."

At that statement, my blood turns ice-cold—no, it's burning like fire, as if it's searing right through my skin. He's out on a date while my cum might still be dried up inside him, just a day after he was crying out my name. Cope arches a sarcastic frown.

"You look a bit red, Tray." I don't care anymore; I've long since stopped caring about what anyone has to say about me. My body trembles with anger, and every hard heartbeat makes my chest ache fiercely.

"Where is he?" I growl through gritted teeth as I take deep, steadying breaths.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Cope says, his expression turning serious.

"I don't know what's been happening, but leave him alone, Tray. He's finally moving forward with his life, living the life he never got to have while growing up. Just let him be."

"Where is he?" I demand.

"Why do you care? You don't even like him."

Something inside me snaps. I leap off the bed and go for Cope. "Because I care, damn it! I care about him, what he's doing, all of it. Got it?" I practically shout in Cope's face. "I don't know why I care so much, but I do. Now tell me where he is."

Cope stares at me for a moment. "I love you like a brother, Tray. But I'm not telling you."

Suddenly, clarity hits me. What a dick. The app—I know exactly where he is. My anger had clouded my mind, but now everything is clear. Without saying another word to Cope, I head to the door and fling it open.

"You won't find him," Cope calls after me.

I smirk, turning to give him a defiant look. "You really underestimate me."

I can’t help but laugh at how I ended up forking out an extra fifty dollars on my ride just to bust the speed limit, but nothing at this moment matters as much as the fear of being too late. My eyes remain fixed on that flashing beacon as I silently pray that he doesn’t move—especially not to some hotel. Just the thought churns my stomach. Before the car has even come to a full stop, I throw open the door and charge straight toward the entrance. Thank God it wasn’t like that swanky joint he was at before—if the door wasn’t opened for me, I swear I would have kicked my way through it.

Inside, the place is massive—damn, really huge—and amid the lively bar and its live band, I can’t immediately spot him. The atmosphere is wild, with people leaping around and singing their hearts out. I first glance toward the stage, knowing full well he wouldn’t be up dancing or joining in the music; he has to be sitting somewhere. I make my way around the perimeter of the room, shoving people aside without a care, even as drinks fly and insults are hurled in my direction. Desperation surges as I round the halfway point and still no sign of him. I light up my phone once more—he’s here. But where? After picking through another quarter of the circle, something in a dark corner grabs my attention. A large guy is leaning in close, whispering into someone’s ear, and when I look over his shoulder, my stomach plummets. There, unmistakably, is Daxton, his eyes closed while the other guy plants kisses down his cheek. My legs move on their own before my mind can catch up. I grab him by the shoulder and yank him back as hard as I can. It takes him a split second to register what has just happened as his eyes blink at me in shock.

“What the fuck?” the other guy seethes, his hand still resting on Daxton’s waist. I zero in on that hand.

“If you want to keep those hands, I suggest you remove them from him now.” Daxton blinks once, twice, and then his outburst fizzles out.

“Don’t worry, Ross. He’s all bark and no bite,” he slurs loudly, his eyes lazily closing and reopening—a clear sign of how wasted he is. I smirk as my gaze drops to his open shirt, revealing the marks I gave him in the shower yesterday.

“Your neck says otherwise.”

“Fuck you,” Daxton spits out as his drink topples over the edge of his glass, spilling on the floor, and he staggers forward, swaying to the left. “Ross, I think he came to tell you something,” he mumbles, almost losing his balance. I quickly move to steady him.

“We’re leaving,” I whisper urgently into his ear. He jabs his elbow into me, making me grimace, but I resist the urge to double over despite the sharp pain in my gut.

“Fuck you.” His eyes shut briefly before reopening to meet Ross’s furious gaze. “He came here to tell you I gave him chlaaamydiaaaaa,” he drawls, chuckling at the end. Ross’s face turns pale, and he steps away from Daxton. Daxton turns his smirk to me as he raises his arms, swaying slightly. “I did it for you, Trayton; now fuck off,” he snarls at me.

Damn. He must have talked to Ashton. Triple damn. “I can explain everything about Ashton, but first, I need to get you out of here and get some water in you.”

“The only thing I need inside me is him.” He points to a shocked Ross. “Now fuck offfff for the fifth time.”

“Firstly”—I point to my finger—“it’s more like twice you’ve told me to fuck off,” I correct him. “And secondly”—I gesture toward the short, bulky guy—“he’s not laying a finger on you again, much less getting inside you.” His anger flares up even more.

This time, Ross grabs his coat from the chair and backs away. “I’m done. Screw this,” he declares. Daxton groans in protest and tries to follow him. I seize him by the hips, and he spins around, splashing his drink in my face before landing a punch. He actually punches me.

“You can fuck off, Trayton King. I’m done with you, and I’m done with all of this.” He gestures dismissively at me. “I’m tired of you treating me like shit, acting like you can just walk all over me and keep hurting me with your bullshit words.” He steps closer, his teeth bared. “You can go to hell if you think you can hurt me anymore, Trayton King. I’ve been through a lotta shit and taken more beatings than your mommy has cooked you hot dinners.” My heart skips a beat, and I freeze, staring at him as a smirk forms on his lips. “Oh wait, that’s probably not many, is it?” I look at him in disbelief at what he just said. Instinctively, my hand wraps around his throat.

“Don’t,” I grit out. “Don’t even go there.” I’m shaking with rage. I know he’s drunk and doesn’t mean it, but he doesn’t realize how deeply those words cut. “Oh boohoo,” he whines. “Did I upset the big, bad Trayton King?”

My jaw clenches, and I tighten my grip on Daxton's throat as he smiles at me, showing his bright teeth. I know I deserve this, but I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me hurt. I scoff.

"You think you have the power to upset me? You think you matter enough to hurt me?" I hiss in his ear, and he stiffens in my grasp. The smirk and his bravado vanish, leaving only raw pain in his eyes, and I immediately feel like shit.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Trayton

Regardless of what Daxton has done or said, he's here because of me. He's in this state because of me. I keep telling myself that I deserve whatever he throws at me, but when it comes to my mom, I can't hold back my anger. I make my way through the bar, shoving him toward the exit. Every so often, he bumps into someone, and as soon as they shoot him a look, I return it with a glare that warns, "Say one word to him, and you'll catch my damn fist."

"I didn't mean it," he mutters as we step outside.

"Keep moving," I bark, guiding him along the sidewalk by his waist. We eventually reach a bench, where I sit him down. I pull up the ride-share app on my phone, hesitating over the button for a moment as I glance behind me at the large hotel sign. I'm uncertain if I can simply take him back to his room and leave him there. I know that once he wakes up, the hatred in him will be even stronger, and I'll have to explain—though right now, I'm at a loss for words.

Why did I do what I did with Ashton? Because I wanted to hurt him. How can I confess that I wanted to cause him pain and humiliate him, just as they did to me when I was sixteen? Even the thought makes me feel weak and immature. Why is it that I can never get over any of this with Daxton? Why does he manage to get under my skin so badly?

“Come on,” I say, grabbing him as his head droops, and he moans when I lift him up. I pull his hand over my shoulder, and he lurches upright.

“Where are we going?” he mumbles.

“To get some sleep,” I reply as I guide him into the hotel lobby and sit him down again. “Stay here and don’t move.” His head lolls back, and his eyes close. I scan the area to ensure no one is watching him too closely, and once I’m convinced he’s all right, I head to the reception desk.

“Do you have a room for two, please?” I ask. The receptionist sizes me up before shifting her gaze to Daxton, who has slumped sideways on the couch I placed him on.

“Rough night,” she remarks.

I flash a smirk and add, “Don’t worry. He’ll be out like a light as soon as we get into the room.” She raises an eyebrow in acknowledgment, then looks at her screen.

“Twin room?” she asks, glancing back at me.

“King room,” I reply with a smirk. There’s no way he’s sleeping in a separate bed. She nods and glances back at her screen.

“We have a king room available,” she confirms. Then she hesitates, eyeing Daxton, who’s passed out behind me. “Given your friend’s level of intoxication,” she continues, “I’ll need to add a fifty-dollar housekeeping fee, just in case of any accidents.” I arch an eyebrow, suspecting this charge isn’t part of their standard policy, but I don’t care right now. I just want to get him safely into the room.

“Fine, whatever.” I sigh. She processes my details.

“That’ll be four hundred and fifty dollars,” she says. I hand over my credit card and glance around the luxurious lobby. This hotel is fancy as fuck, and while the cost is high, it’s not a big deal. My father will foot the bill. As soon as I have the key, I turn to find Daxton sprawled on the sofa, mouth agape, as people pass by, wrinkling their noses at his clothing—tight jeans, chains dangling, hair covering his eyes, and silver rings on all ten fingers. To them, he must seem like a menace to society; to me, he looks good enough to eat. I walk over and lift him off the sofa as he groans, pressing his face into my chest.

“Tray,” he mumbles.

“Dax,” I reply, guiding him to the elevator.

“Where are we?” he asks, tilting his head to take in his surroundings. “Is this a mansion?” he wonders out loud, gazing at the ornate ceiling. I

chuckle, thinking he probably hasn't been anywhere like this before.

"Something like that," I answer as he turns his head toward me.

"Are you mad at me?" he asks quietly as we step into the elevator.

"No."

"But I am mad at you."

"I know, and you should be." We ride in silence until we reach our floor, and I lead Daxton toward our room. As I let go to grab the key, he stumbles slightly, murmuring "Sorry" before regaining his balance. I push open the door and nod for him to enter first. He moves in slowly, his head surveying the luxurious space—a couch is paired with a TV, there's even a small kitchen area, all making the place seem somewhat worth the price. When his gaze shifts left, he spots the large, white king-size bed in the center of the room. He glances at me and then turns his attention toward the couch.

"I'll sleep on here," he declares.

"No way—you're sleeping in that bed with me," I step over and pull him close. I know he's drunk, and while I would never take advantage of that, right now, all I want is to taste him. His eyes flick from mine to my lips and back again.

"I'm mad at you," he repeats, his breath reeking of vodka, though I barely register it.

"I'm mad at you too."

He frowns. "You said you weren't."

"I lied." I lean in, placing a gentle kiss on his lip ring, And he shudders.

"You lie a lot." He breathes. To silence him, I slam my lips onto his, my tongue invading his mouth as he moans into the kiss. Amid the taste of vodka, I still recognize Daxton—the flavor that has become maddeningly addictive. His hands slide around my back and into my hair, sending shivers down my spine—I love it when he grabs my hair. I pull back and meet his lust-filled, heavy gaze. "I want you." He breathes out the words. "Mad—and all."

"Not tonight." I step back, and he watches me as if I've just dropped the worst news imaginable. "Not when you're like this."

He scoffs, stumbling toward the bed. "Oh, so you can blackmail me into sucking your dick, but you won't fuck me just because I've had a few drinks? Aren't you such a saint, Trayton." He mocks me, dramatically placing a hand on his chest. "Your morals are flawless."

“And you’re a fucking brat,” I growl, gritting my teeth. “Now get undressed and go to bed.”

“Suck my dick,” he snaps, flipping me off with a mocking eye roll.

Little does he know, I would swallow his dick whole if he wasn’t so fucking drunk. I need to get away before I end up dropping to my knees for him.

I head into the bathroom to wash my face, thankful for the disposable toothbrushes provided. After quickly brushing my teeth and washing my face, I strip down to my boxers and step back out, tossing my clothes onto the bed. Glancing sideways, I see Daxton lying on top of the covers, with four small empty whiskey bottles resting on his chest and the mini-bar door wide open.

“Fucking hell.” I exhale softly. His eyes are shut, and his chest rises and falls slowly with each breath. It’s hard to tell how much he’s had to drink. I lean over the bed, carefully removing the bottles from his chest and tossing them into the trash, trying to figure out how to proceed without waking him. I start with his shirt, lifting it up as his arms slump, and he groans, attempting to roll over as I free one arm. Gently, I roll him back onto his back, slip the other arm out, and slowly pull it over his head, tilting his head up gently. I take a moment to really look at him; despite the baggy tops and sweatshirts he usually wears, he’s more defined than he appears. I can’t stand the scars scattered across the lower part of his abdomen and along the sides of his ribs. Just seeing them fills me with anger as I trace one of the four-inch scars up his ribs with my finger. I sigh, sitting back on the bed, unfastening his belt, and carefully sliding off his jeans, leaving his boxers on. I step back to take in the sight of him. Even in sleep, he looks sad, with his brows furrowed and his lips slightly downturned. My chest aches as I watch him. He groans, turning onto his side, and I approach to pull the blanket from underneath him to cover him. His eyes flutter open slightly as he buries his face deeper into the pillow.

“Tray,” he whispers softly, glancing at me.

“Go to sleep, Dax,” I reply, meeting his gaze. His arm reaches out, lightly brushing over the small tattoo on my chest.

“What’s this?”

“It’s nothing.”

“No tattoo is meaningless; they always have meaning,” he whispers again, tracing the star map inked on my skin with his fingers.

“It’s just a star map,” I say, letting my eyes wander over his face, as his flutter open briefly before fatigue and drunkenness pull them closed again. “Did you love Bexley?” he asks between breaths. I frown at the unexpected question.

“What makes you ask that?”

He sighs into his pillow, still with his eyes shut. “Just answer it. Did you?” I know he’s drunk and likely won’t remember anything later, which is why I feel compelled to answer now.

“At the time, I believed he was everything,” I confess. “But I was young—everything feels amplified and dramatic in your teens.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“No,” I immediately admit, convinced I owe him the truth. “I think it was lust, something I craved—an experiment. Bex was the one I always believed was out of reach, so I longed for him for years. But it was never love.” I look down at Dax, assuming he’s dozed off, and begin to stand.

“Have you ever been in love?” I pause and collapse back onto the bed.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “There was someone when I was young again, so I don’t really understand what it was. I don’t know if I can love, Dax.” Without knowing why, I reach out and push his hair away from his face. “Who gave you this scar?” I ask, my fingers tracing the marred skin from his eyebrow to his cheekbone.

“You,” he murmurs, the word escaping his lips like a soft sigh. My hand freezes, and I frown as I look at him. His eyes remain closed, his breaths measured and heavy, while my fingers explore the sorrow etched onto his face, lingering on his cheeks. His eyes flutter open, meeting mine with intense, unspoken emotion. Those deep-emerald eyes—once full of sparkle—now drown in sadness. I cradle his cheek in my palm, and he leans into the touch, closing his eyes again.

“Who hurt you, Dax?” I whisper. I feel a shift immediately; his body tenses, and the warmth drains from his face under my hand. His eyes snap open, pain flooding them as he says,

“You.” His voice is barely a whisper. “You hurt me the most, Tray.” I freeze, staring at him, my hand still resting on his cheek. The urge I once had to see Daxton suffer, to make him feel my own pain, now twists in my chest like a knife. His eyes close again, and my hand falls away as I stand, needing a moment alone. Everything aches—my heart, that relentless pain pounding in my chest.“Tray.” Daxton’s soft voice reaches me from across

the room. “You mentioned not knowing if you’d ever been in love because you were young.” I remain silent, curious about what he’ll say next. His back remains turned to me. “When you think about that person, what do you feel?” I decide not to answer straightaway, but deep down, I already know. I often think about that person—the boy at the lighthouse, the one who hurt me the most.

“Pain,” I respond without hesitation because it’s the truth. It always aches to think of him, constantly wondering about the possibilities, what could have been if he hadn’t left like everyone else.

“Then you have been in love, Tray. Love always hurts. Believe me, I know.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Daxton

Damn. My head is pounding. I groan and bury my face into the soft pillow that feels way too luxurious to be mine. It's like lying on a cloud or something. I crack my eyes open, but the sunlight feels like it's scorching straight out of hell, so I quickly turn away, shielding myself from the glare. That's when I see Trayton lying next to me, staring at the ceiling, and memories flood back. I wish I could just forget everything. It's not fair that I remember it all. Trayton seems lost in thought, his thumbs tapping each of his fingers. At first, I assume it's a coping mechanism for anxiety, but then I notice his lips moving. He's counting or mumbling something too quiet for me to hear. Is he making a list? But of what? I take a moment to look at his face, noticing the cut on his lip—a result of me punching him last night. I don't feel too bad about that; he's hit me plenty of times. It's what I said to him at the club that makes my stomach churn. The words about his mom. I'm really angry at him for what happened with Ashton. Even now, just looking at him stirs up my anger. But he didn't deserve what I said. His response was warranted: *You think you have the power to upset me? You think you matter enough to hurt me?* Those words stung. Of course, I don't have the power, and of course, I don't matter. He's shown me that repeatedly, so why do I let him hurt me? Why do I give him that power?

I know the reason. That feeling has always been there—an undercurrent of resentment for him, for his actions, for simply being who he is. I despise

him for walking into my life all those years ago, despise him for ever showing me kindness. I buried that feeling, believing it was just a passing phase, something that would eventually disappear. I locked it away so deep that I convinced myself I felt nothing for Trayton King. It turns out that it was tucked inside a box so hidden that even I struggled to reach it. But he didn't have to fight at all. One kiss from him was enough to tear that box apart, leaving everything exposed—and I fucking hate him for it.

It's almost as if he were under a spell. Trayton blinks rapidly, turns his head sideways, and his eyes meet mine. Why does my heart ache the very moment I look at him? I should be angry, but it's pure pain that overwhelms me. We lie there, locked in a long, silent stare; my gaze fixes on the cut on his lip, and though the word "Sorry" fights to escape my throat, I refuse to speak it.

"Hi," he says so quietly that if I hadn't seen his lips move, I might have missed it. I don't answer. It feels as if opening my mouth would force me to confess how sorry I am for hurting him—for hitting him, for all those dreadful things I said. But has he ever apologized for hurting me? Never. His eyes wander with something that isn't anger—more like guilt, as though he feels remorse. So why doesn't he just say sorry? Why the fuck can't he apologize for hurting me? *You hurt me the most, Trayton*. I told him exactly how much pain he caused, yet he remains silent. I let out a bitter laugh and shake my head. His brows knit together as I turn around and sit up on the bed, searching for my clothes. "Dax," he calls, pain evident in his voice.

I whip my head around, eyes narrowing as his widen, and hiss, "Don't. Don't fucking 'Dax' me with that tone, Trayton. I'm not the one who should be feeling guilty right now. Why do I have to feel guilty when I've done nothing wrong? It should be you groveling, begging to say sorry. Why do I have to apologize when I never fucking do anything wrong?" My breaths come out sharply as I stand abruptly, grabbing my neatly folded jeans from the seat. Suddenly, I hear shuffling behind me—he's here, gripping my arm firmly. I try to wrench it free with a desperate yank, but his hold won't let go.

"Dax, please." His eyes are heavy, and his brows drawn in pain. He clearly looks like he's suffering, and I hate how my heart aches to mend him, to bring a smile back to his face. His eyes slide to my lips, and I freeze, knowing that if he kisses me, I won't have the strength to push him away.

“Please, don’t, Tray.” Even with the brokenness in his gaze, he steps forward. I shake my head, my brows furrowing. “Please,” I beg again. But what am I even begging for—his kiss or his restraint? I honestly don’t know anymore.He doesn’t move in immediately; the moment stretches out in slow motion, as though he’s waiting for me to push him away. But I no longer have that power over him. His lips ghost over mine, so soft and tender that I melt into a puddle beneath him. I tilt my head as his lips fall on me again. It’s the only movement I can muster, and he doesn’t retreat. He plants gentle kisses down my cheek and then along my neck, leaving me to sag in relief—as if this is exactly what I’ve been longing for, what my body has been calling out for.

“Please stop hurting me, Trayton,” I whisper, rolling my head forward as his lips meet mine. He places a gentle kiss there before pulling back. His sad eyes lock onto mine, and god, they drown me, pulling me under with every glance.

“I don’t know how not to, Dax,” he admits, and I think it’s the most honest thing he’s ever said. There’s no anger in his tone—only an intense sadness that makes me believe he truly doesn’t know how to stop hurting me.The pain in his voice and the raw truth in his words drive me to wrap my hand around his neck as he sinks onto the bed. I pull him close, my legs wrapping around him, and when I pull back to look at his face, he lowers his head, as if he can’t bear meeting my eyes. I cup his cheeks, gently forcing him to look at me. He sighs deeply—eyes closed.

“Look at me,” I whisper, but he keeps his gaze down. So I lean in and kiss the cut on his lip, trailing soft kisses across his face—over his nose, his forehead, and finally back to his lips. His eyes flutter open, capturing me in a trance I can never escape. “I’m still mad at you,” I murmur against his lips.

“I know.” He breathes, the weight of his words hanging between us.

“But I need you.” The words are out just before our lips meet in a slow, deliberate kiss. Our tongues dance together as our heads move from side to side, unable to get enough of each other. I press against him, a soft moan escaping as my desire grows. His fingers dig into my hips, pulling me closer. The heat of his body seeps through our clothes, igniting every nerve. I breathe in his scent—a mix of pine and musk that is unmistakably him—and it sends my head spinning.For a moment, our lips part as I rest my

forehead against his, feeling his warm, rapid breaths on my face. In the dim light, his eyes are dark pools in which I could easily drown.

“We shouldn’t,” he whispers, yet his hands slide up my back, revealing his own longing.

“I know,” I murmur softly, unable to stop myself from placing gentle kisses along his jaw. The tension between us crackles like an open fire.My heart beats so hard I wonder if he can hear it as I trail my fingers down his chest, matching the rapid rhythm of his pulse. His skin feels deliciously hot under my touch, and all I want is to explore every inch of him. But I hold back, savoring the slow burn of anticipation. My lips find the sensitive spot just below his ear, and he shivers, letting out a soft gasp that sends sparks racing down my spine. His fingers entwine in my hair, pulling me closer.

“We can stop,” I say, even as every part of me rebels at the thought. I want him—I have wanted him for so long. Even though I’ve had him before, this feels different. It isn’t rushed or angry; it’s just us, lost in the moment. His eyes meet mine, swirling with conflict. For a fleeting second, I fear he might push me away. Then his hand cups the back of my neck, drawing me in for another searing kiss. “Don’t you dare,” he growls softly against my mouth.

A rush of relief and lust overwhelms me as I push his shoulders, causing him to sink back onto the mattress. Our bodies pressed together in maddening friction. I roll my hips, drawing a low moan from him that reverberates through my chest. I feel every inch of him, hard and aching with desire. His hands roam my back, leaving burning trails on my skin, and I shiver at his touch as goose bumps run along my arms. The room feels too hot, too confined to hold the intensity between us. I pull back just enough to look at him, absorbing the sight of his flushed cheeks, swollen lips, and tousled hair. The vulnerability in his eyes tugs at my heart. This is more than physical attraction—it’s years of wanting finally coming to life.

“Are you sure?” I give him one last chance to retreat. Part of me hopes he will, knowing that for him, this may be nothing more than a moment of weakness. But for me, this is everything. He lifts his head, and our lips meet again as he gently spins me so that my back rests against the soft mattress. His strong arms hold me in a warm embrace as he leans over to press soft kisses along my chest.

“I want to feel you,” he whispers while sitting up on his knees. I nod, craving the feeling of him inside me as much as he craves me. When I start

to turn around, he stops me with a shake of his head. “No. I want to see you.” A part of me wants to turn away. I know if I face him, I’ll fall apart, overwhelmed by the intimacy and the thought of my heart breaking with every thrust of his hips. But I stay, looking up at him as he pulls his boxers down, and his fingers gently tug at mine until they follow suit. We’re both visibly hard as a rock, and I take the moment to admire him—he is so incredibly perfect, maybe even too perfect for me.

“I don’t have lube.” He breathes heavily, glancing down at me. Usually, you wouldn’t take this chance without lube, but if I don’t feel him inside me right now, I feel like I might die.

“Spit on me,” I rasp, my voice low and husky. Trayton bites his lip, his nostrils flaring as a thin line of spit trickles out. I shiver when it touches me, and he does it a couple more times, spitting on himself as he strokes his even more hardening dick. Pre-cum leaks from the tip as he squeezes, and he gathers it with his fingers and pushes them into me. I gasp as he leans over me with unwavering eyes; he lines himself up and slowly eases inside me, making every inch deliberate, every sensation intense. My eyes flutter closed as he fills me completely, and his head drops to my neck, his soft moans sending shivers along my skin. I whimper, clutching his back—he is so big, I’ve never felt this full before. I never imagined Trayton could make me feel so utterly complete, and in this deep, intimate moment, all my doubts fade away with every steady thrust, every breathless gasp that escapes me, every tender whisper of my name as his teeth graze my collarbone.

“Tray.” I mewl as he grinds his hips, hitting that spot that drives me wild. He keeps doing it, and his hands slide down my legs, gripping my ass as he sits up. He pulls my hips up, slides out, and then eases back in, targeting that sweet spot. His eyes lock onto mine, holding me in place as he takes me completely. Each slow thrust steals my breath. He just stares, mouth slightly open, like he’s capturing everything about me. I hate it.

“You hate me,” I grit out as he presses that spot. He pauses, frowning, then thrusts in harder. “Oh my god, yes.” I breathe, the sensation overwhelming me. I don’t even need to touch myself; the way he moves and looks at me is enough.

“I don’t,” he argues, and I keep my eyes closed. I can’t face him when he says that; it’s just the moment talking.

“Fuckfuck,” I cry out as he keeps hitting that spot. “Trayton.” The tingling spreads from my spine through my body, and I tremble, my legs shaking in Trayton’s grip.

“Eyes here, Dax.” He leans in as he thrusts deeper.

“Fuck, you’re so perfect.” He groans. “Look at me, please.” His breaths are ragged now. I force my eyes open, knowing I’ll regret it. The moment our gazes lock, I let go. The sensation of falling overwhelms me as I climax, shooting out across our chests, but I barely notice as the descent continues. My stomach flips repeatedly as Trayton’s eyes pierce through me, and he thrusts into me with a powerful move, crying out my name over and over until his lips brush my ear.

“I don’t hate you,” he whispers.

I stop falling.

I hit the bottom.

I shatter.

The ride dragged on, silent and heavy, even though I felt strangely light, like a burden had been lifted—but it hadn’t. I was furious about what he did. He always twists things to seem justified, but I know he did it to hurt me, nothing else. And then, showing up last night—something I still need to talk with Cope about. Tray’s his friend, but why would you tell someone who despises me where I am? What was Cope thinking? Maybe I’d regret my night with Ross, but that regret should be mine alone, not his to decide. As the driver stops outside the college, I sigh, staring at the imposing building. I know once we pass through those gates, I’ll have to pretend to hate him again. I push open the door, one foot ready to step out, when Trayton grabs my arm, halting me. He doesn’t look at me at first, but then his eyes meet mine, trapping me. “You do matter enough,” he utters. I frown, confused, but he’s out of the car before I can respond.

I matter enough for what?

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Daxton

Econ is easily the worst class I've ever signed up for. Maybe it's because I've let myself fall so far behind. Right now, my life is all about art, hockey, and Trayton King. I've neglected everything else. I warned the dean this would happen, but did he care? No. Not even a bit. I have to admit, though, the project has been pretty cool. I've created some of my best work and even started dabbling in watercolor, which I never thought I'd enjoy, but I've made some incredible art. Today was supposed to be Trayton's interview, but I didn't cancel directly. I saw Coach Denny earlier and explained that I'm behind and need today off. Trayton texted me, asking why we weren't doing the interview. I haven't replied.

Pretending I don't like him is easy. It helps me get through the day. But every moment he's in my thoughts, I ache, I feel sick. It's intense pain mixed with fireworks exploding inside me whenever he's near. I can't let myself dwell on this. I just can't. My head threatens a headache from staring at this document I can't make sense of. Then my phone vibrates on the table. It's Trayton video calling me. I frown at my phone and ignore it, trying to focus on the document, but my phone rings again. I glance around; thankfully, there aren't many people around. I put my headphones on and answer the video call. A moan echoes through the speaker, and I drop my

phone, scrambling for it under the table as the sounds continue. When I finally get a hold of it, it's not Trayton's face staring back at me.

It's his dick.

His beautiful cock, glistening at the tip. Then the camera shifts, landing on a neat row of books that now frame his throbbing dick. My stomach churns as I scan the vast library, knowing he's somewhere in its endless rows. "What are you doing?" I hiss into my headset, my eyes darting around.

"I came about the interview, but then I saw you—sitting at that table, deep in thought, biting your lip ring. My cock remembered what that mouth can do. I couldn't wait to get back to my dorm." A sigh escapes him, quickly followed by another guttural moan as his hand squeezes his head.

"You need to leave the library, Trayton. If you get caught…" I mutter, shaking my head while my own dick hardens in my pants as his hand speeds up. I can't tear my eyes away, and when the camera shifts slightly and his face fills the frame, I almost combust. The intensity in his gaze, his hand still pumping, makes him seem almost lost in lust—drugged, with his lips promising endless pleasure and strands of brown hair falling seductively around his face.

"Fuck," I breathe. He looks unbelievably hot. I curl my toes in my sneakers, fighting the urge to move.

"Dax." Trayton breathes, his eyes locking with mine through the camera; that faint string I was holding snaps under the tension. Everything in me shatters as I leap from the table, my books and pens forgotten, eyes scanning each row of the library. Trayton's moans, mixed with my name, keep echoing in my ears, his breath growing increasingly harsh.

"Where are you?" I grit out in panic as Trayton shifts the camera, his moans growing louder. Usually, the fear of being caught would overwhelm me, but I only want him—to see him break down for me, whispering my name over and over. I squint at the screen and glimpse books I've never seen before. I may not be a total book nerd, but I know this library well. That row is unfamiliar, so my legs kick into gear, and I sprint toward the far end of the library.

"I'm coming, Dax." Tray's husky voice fills my ears just as I stop at the end of the row. There, Trayton leans against a case of books. His head tilts up; his eyes lock with mine, and then he moans, calling my name in harsh gasps. His body convulses as sprays of cum hit the floor. I yank the

headphones from my ears as I pocket them and my phone. I race toward him. The moment I reach him, his body shudders again, and I grab his face in my palms, crashing my lips onto his. Our tongues clash in a frenzied, aggressive dance. I slide my hand around the back of his head while his creeps up, wrapping around my neck. We wrestle for control of the kiss, but Trayton wins when his fingers tighten, and he tips my head back, his rough mouth forcing its claim. Our teeth meet as our kiss grows even more frantic until Trayton pulls away slightly, still one hand gripping my throat. His other one slides under the waistband of my jeans, caressing me as I moan, and I watch his fingers trace the length of me beneath the fabric.

"I want to taste you." His words are quiet. Before I can even blink, he spins me around so my back hits the case of books behind me, then drops to his knees, unbuttoning my jeans.

"Tray, no," I hiss, trying to push his hand away, but he overpowers me, smoothly pulling out my throbbing cock. All I can do is stare as I weakly plead, "Tray, don't." My eyes dart to the end of the row. When I look back, he smirks up at me.

"Let me show you how sorry I am, Dax." Without further warning, his mouth wraps around my cock, and my head spins with pleasure. It's like nothing I've ever felt before. He works me deep, taking me until he gags around the head, and I can think of nothing but the overwhelming sensation.

My arms grip the bookcase behind me as I pant. "Oh my god, fuck." I jolt at the shock of his tongue teasing around my piercing. Then he sucks on the head and swiftly makes fast work of swallowing my dick down again.

I lower my head as I watch him take my throbbing cock deep into his mouth, his eyes initially closed before snapping open and locking onto mine. In that fierce gaze, heat, desire, and raw desperation blaze back at me as he never once breaks our contact.

"You look so fucking good, Tray," I murmur, my hands raking through his hair as I savor every moment. Droplets of saliva escape his mouth, streaming down his cheek, but he doesn't falter—he turns into a deliciously messy display on the ground. My dick swallowed eagerly by his hungry throat.

Trayton King is on his knees, sucking my dick.

The sensation of his warm, wet mouth, his tongue relentlessly caressing my piercing and the tip of my cock, sends shockwaves of pleasure coursing through my body. My entire being trembles, my balls weighted with desire

as a tingling heat ignites every nerve, as though he's draining my very soul. Sensing my shudder, he pulls back briefly, then takes charge with his hand, stroking me hard and fast. "Let me taste you, baby. Let me swallow every drop you give me," he growls.

"Fuck, Tray." I moan as his lips return to claim me, showing no restraint. He sucks, licks, and gags with an uncontrolled passion, his saliva mingling with my pre-cum as he works over me with the precision and intensity of a champion scoring in his game.

"I'm coming, Tray." I'm hoarse as I grip his hair, my fingers tightening as I come, repeatedly grunting his name in pure ecstasy. His moans, the deep vibrations of his throat resonating against me, send me spiraling into a wave of euphoria. My body electrifies—my feet tingle, butterflies swarm every inch of me, and my stomach churns as if on an endless rollercoaster—until the rush slowly subsides, leaving me slumped against the bookcase.

Trayton stands before me, his thumb gathering the mix of spit and cum that glistens on his lip. Moving in closer, he presses his thumb to my open mouth. I exhale a deep sigh as my tongue wraps around it in a deliciously submissive embrace. With a sly flick, he hooks his thumb behind my teeth, drawing me in until his lips graze my ear.

"I'll see you in the locker room in twenty minutes for that interview," he whispers, kissing the side of my neck before stepping back, giving me one last tantalizing glance. With a smirk playing on his lips, he walks away, leaving me barely standing and reeling with the truth—I had Trayton King on his knees, yet I was never truly in control.

I set up the camera—apparently, I can't say no to Trayton. I'm irritated with myself for even being here—he didn't even ask.

"I'll see you in the locker room in twenty minutes for that interview."

Prick.

But after he practically drained every ounce of energy from me, I did exactly as he requested; I scrubbed my foot across the floor, trying to get rid of his cum stains, and gathered what little I had left from the table. And now

I’m here, waiting for him to finish showering so I can get this interview over with.

Ten minutes later, Trayton appears and sits in front of the camera, wearing the most maddening smirk. His eyes sweep over me, lingering on my lips, and it almost feels like he’s devouring me with his gaze. I shift uncomfortably in my seat, recalling how irresistible he looked with my cock in his mouth—and I quickly remind myself that this isn’t the time for such thoughts.

His grin widens even further. My cheeks burn, and I can tell he notices because he chuckles. Damn him for making me feel this way. Damn him for draining me, for keeping me here like a helpless mess, and damn him for turning me on while his eyes remain fixed on my lips.

“Trayton.” I clear my throat, unwilling to let him watch me like that during the interview.

“What did you want to ask me, Dax?” His hoarse question echoes in the quiet locker room, yet his eyes never leave my lips. There’s so much I want to ask him—why he makes me feel this way, what he gains from this, what exactly he wants from it, whatever this messed-up situation is.

Our eyes lock, his eyebrow rising in a silent challenge.

“For the interview, Daxton. What did you want to ask me?”

Damn—yes, the interview. This is exactly what he does to me; my mind goes to mush in his presence.

“Uh, yeah.” I clear my throat again, shifting in my chair as I try to get comfortable, though I’m far from it.

Our gazes remain locked, and his raised eyebrow dares me silently. But dares me to do what?

“What are you thinking about right now?” I ask, his grin morphs into something similar to the Joker, his eyes sparkling as they slowly travel over my body.

Suddenly, it feels like the temperature has risen—did someone turn off the air conditioning?

When his eyes meet mine again, they widen as he spreads his legs out, and all I want is to crawl to him on all fours and climb him like a tree. His thumb brushes against his bottom lip, drawing my gaze back to his—I know exactly what he’s thinking.

“Next question,” he growls. I nod, frozen like a deer in headlights, wondering how I can be this aroused so soon after he just left me

completely spent. All I can imagine is bouncing on his cock where he sits, marking him as mine by spilling all over his chest.

God, I need a cold shower—and maybe an exorcism.

Clearing my throat for the third time, I ask, “What do you love about Devil Hawks?”

His reply comes instantly: “Why don’t you ask me something you really want to know? Not for the camera. For you.”

I’m momentarily stunned. First, he wanted this interview formal, and now he wants it to be just us, sitting here trading questions. I take a deep breath and then ask the one question I’ve always wanted to: “Do you believe in love?” His eyes dart to the camera still recording. He told me to ask what I wanted, and here it is. No backing out now, Trayton.

“No,” he answers flatly. “What does love mean to you?”

Is he serious?

“I’m leading the interview,” I protest.

“And I’m asking a simple question.” But it’s far from simple for me—a loaded fucking question.

“Love can mean so many different things. It might be one thing for you and a thousand things for me.”

“What does love mean to you?” he repeats. I try to give a straightforward answer, but of course, that doesn’t suffice—he wants to dig deep, to peel me open and see just how much more he can hurt me. And sadly, I let him—time and time again, so I answer truthfully.

“To me, love is the person I’d run to if I knew we had only one more day on Earth. It’s the person I’d want to lie with when everything crumbles around us—no fear, no tears, just us because that’s what it would be. Being content with them on my last day in this world.”

We sit in silence, staring at each other as if he’s processing it before slowly nodding.

“If I ever figure out what love means for me, I’ll let you know. But don’t hold your breath.” He turns to the camera. “Over and out.” Then he stands and walks toward his locker, leaving me sitting there, utterly stunned.

“You didn’t answer any questions—what the fuck?” I call, leaping to my feet and storming after him.

“Wasn’t feeling it,” he replies, his tone suddenly sour and flat.

“Wasn’t feeling it?” I shout louder. “Wasn’t fucking feeling it?” I throw my head back, laughing in a mix of disbelief and raw anger. The sheer

nonchalance of his “wasn’t feeling it” stuns me, and I fix him with a searing glare as he stands there, eyes dark and explosive, daring me to push further.

“Because it’s all about Trayton—what he wants, when he wants it, and WHO he wants,” I scream. “Nobody else matters, do they? It’s their time, their effort, their fucking feelings on the line!” The words tumble out in a stream, not all perfectly on point but all fueled by simmering rage and desperation. “Trayton King, parading around Hawksview with those broad shoulders, those mesmerizing eyes, and that glorious fucking dick—he does exactly what he pleases, with no regard for anyone else!” For a split second, a trace of a smile crosses his face before it vanishes into a look of resigned defeat.

“Just sit in that chair and see how you like it when I hurl questions that make you uncomfortable,” he snaps. I laugh bitterly, shaking my head and spreading my arms wide in exasperation.

“You just did. You told me to ask you what I wanted to know. So I did…” My voice drips with challenge. “Ask me anything—make me uncomfortable—because if that big, egotistical Trayton King gives you an order, you obey without question.” I watch him, his eyes wide, shocked, and is that wonder, as I push him further. “You know, I wasn’t even planning on doing these interviews today—I’ve got other work that isn’t all about ice hockey,” I snap, my fingers cracking crisply in the charged air. “But you knew that, didn’t you—Coach would have mentioned it—yet you demanded I be here. Now you say ‘Oh, I’m not feeling it?’” I suck in a breath. I’m vibrating with fury, but underneath it all, I’m vulnerable too. “This isn’t the fucking Trayton show!” My jaw tightens as I continue, unable to tamp down the torrent of emotions. “So, what do you want to know, Trayton King? Do you want to hear that life is a miserable shitshow? That I despise it most days? Or perhaps”—I go wide-eyed, snapping my fingers at him—“that I’ve thought about dying more often than I’ve truly thought about living?”

“What?” he murmurs softly. I hadn’t meant to let all that spill out. It just happened in the heat of the moment.

“Forget it,” I mutter, the fiery urge to unleash my anger dissipating now that I’ve said it. It’s something I never intended to reveal. Trayton cautiously steps closer.

“Do you think about dying a lot?” he asks, his surprise evident. “Dax.” His gentle voice fractures something within me, and I take a deep breath.

“I’ve thought about it plenty,” I admit, exhaling heavily. “It’s not the idea of leaving this world that frightens me. It’s the fear of failure, the agony of it not working, that haunts me more. I researched the least painful ways. Taking a bunch of pills and drifting into sleep seems the least painful. But then I wonder, what if I don’t take enough? What if it fails? What would be the point? Just to end up in a hospital bed for days, feeling like absolute hell, only to return to school where people who despise me treat me like a freak. Back to a so-called home where torment and beatings await.”

“But why?” Tray snaps, desperation in his voice.

“Why?” I laugh bitterly. “Because I sit here, Tray, and I can assure you there’s not a single soul who’d shed a tear if I died tomorrow. No one cares about me. I have no one. I had someone once, and now he’s gone.”

“That’s not true,” he grits out, his jaw clenched.

“Yes, it is. Tell me, who really cares about me?” I challenge, raising an eyebrow.

“Me,” he says, his eyes locking onto mine, his face softening.

“What?” I must have misheard.

“Me. I care. I would be sad if you left this world tomorrow.”

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Daxton

Today is the day I finally finish Trayton's tattoo. Everything in the past few weeks—the shock about Ashton, the chaos at the hotel, the library, that interview—piled up until it was too much. Trayton was like a storm: one minute he pushed me away, the next he warmed me with his touches. My heart couldn't take the endless highs and lows. I needed space, a moment to step back from him.

Maybe he needed that space, too, because not once did he reach out. Even though I told myself I needed time apart, my twisted thoughts burned, angry that he wouldn't even try.

I know my time with him is running out. We could never be more than the confusing, bittersweet mess we are now. He will break my heart—it isn't a question of if, but when. I keep thinking, maybe I'll learn to live with the pain of him breaking me over and over again, maybe I can grow to accept it because the pain of never feeling Trayton King's kiss again might be even worse.

But soon enough, he'll find someone else, and that thought cuts deeper than anything else.

Hawksview was supposed to be my fresh start—until Trayton King waltzed in and turned everything upside down in both amazing and awful ways.

I’ll never truly forgive him for coming back into my life and tearing me apart.

So here I stand, at the end of our last tattoo session together, swallowing my pain and forcing a smile as if the silent words begged him to be with me, to kiss me. For two long hours, he has sat quietly while Max dropped by and chatted, and I remained mute, eyes fixed where his gaze burned a hole through my mind. I can’t trust myself to speak or even look at him—it hurts too much.

“Finished,” I croak out, pulling the machine away from his arm. I push my feelings aside for a moment because, damn, I have just completed my first tattoo. I grin at the sight of his arm; it looks so damn good.

Trayton lights up with excitement, buzzing in his chair. Max even hovers around, eager to catch a glimpse. I stand up as Trayton moves over to the long mirror.

“I can’t believe how good it looks.” Trayton’s eyes light up as he gazes at the mirror, while I position another one to give him a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the intricate designs wrapped around his arm. My smile stretches wider, filled with pride as I admire the swirling patterns and bold lines of my first tattoo creation. The whole shop buzzes with excitement, everyone gathering around to catch a glimpse of the masterpiece. Some eagerly clutch their phones, asking Trayton if they can snap a picture. He nods enthusiastically, his grin stretching from ear to ear.

“You did good, boy,” Max says, giving my shoulder a hearty slap. A surge of pride and excitement courses through me.

Trayton’s eyes lock onto mine in the mirror, filled with intense appreciation. “You’ve outdone yourself, Dax. This is beyond anything I could have imagined.” His words send warmth spreading through my chest, and I have to look away, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks.

“Thanks. I’m just glad you like it.”

Max clears his throat, cutting through the moment. “All right, get him wrapped up.”

As I gently apply the protective wrap over Trayton’s freshly inked skin, my fingers linger a moment too long, feeling the electric charge between us. His muscles twitch slightly under my touch, and I wonder if he feels it too.

“So, big game coming up in a couple of weeks, right?” I ask, trying to focus on anything but the closeness between us.

“Kinda, just a friendly,” he replies, low and distant, as if the game is the last thing on his mind, or maybe it’s me he doesn’t want to talk to.

“That’s done, then,” I say, sighing as I stand and begin tidying up my equipment. “I’ll see you around.” I toss the comment over my shoulder, my hands busy, but my mind is restless. A sick feeling churns inside me, an ache that pulls me toward him, craving him. It’s like my heart is tied to him, begging me to be near, to touch him, and I’m struggling to deny it.

“Dax.” Tray’s voice hits me like a jolt, and because I’m busy shifting things on the table, I don’t turn around. “Dax, look at me.” His tone is sharp now, slicing through my focus. I hesitate, unable to meet his gaze.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. Just go, Tray,” I murmur weakly.

“It’s crazy that you think I was asking. Look. At. Me.” His insistence forces me to spin around, frowning at him. But his smile lights up his face, playful and knowing. “It’s so easy to rile you up.”

I shake my head, trying to hide the smirk tugging at my lips as I study his maddening expression. He steps closer, each measured stride tightening the distance between us, and I draw in a sharp breath. I lower my head to hold back the swirling emotions. Then his hand finds my face, tenderly lifting it until our gaze connects, and his eyes always feel like a punch to my gut—eyes that have always captivated me. At his touch, my heart jolts with a soft, overwhelming cry of happiness.

“It’s been weird not seeing you lately,” he whispers, his eyes flickering between mine.

I nod. “Yeah, I’ve had a lot going on,” I lie, even though the truth is that I’ve been avoiding him.

“Liar.” He grins; it’s a playful accusation. “You’ve just been avoiding me.” I stay silent, locked in his gaze. With a gentle lift of his lip, he continues, “It’s okay. I have too.” His voice softens as his shoulders sag with vulnerability.

I nod again, trying to steady the flutter in my chest. “Well, tattooing is done. I’ll probably only be at training a few times a week, so I shouldn’t be around too much.” I force a smile before stepping back. Trayton frowns, and his hand meets mine, our fingers intertwining. I close my eyes, drawing a deep, reluctant breath, all the while hating how perfect it feels to be held by him.

“Because I don’t know how to handle what I feel for you, Dax. Not because I don’t want to be with you. The last few weeks have been pure

hell. My…” He pauses, jaw clenching before he continues, “I have physically ached.”

My heart skips a beat at his confession, and suddenly, I’m lost in the depth of his gaze. “I’ve never dealt with feelings before, Dax. I’ve only ever known hate. I always hated you—and now I don’t. This new feeling overwhelms me. Just be patient with me,” he pleads, his brows furrowing as he waits for my reply.

“Okay,” I reply softly. I could never refuse him. His smile returns, gentle yet daring. He steps forward to press a soft, lingering kiss against my lips before pulling away.

“What are you doing to me, Dax?” he murmurs so quietly I only just about hear him as he releases my hand, moving toward the door. When he reaches it, he turns back, and I stand there, heart pounding so fiercely I fear it might burst out of my chest and run after him. “I will never be able to thank you enough for this.” He raises his arm with a playful spark in his eye. “But this isn’t over.” His smirk deepens. “I just emailed you what I want for the other half of the sleeve. I can’t wait to see your design.” With that, his dazzling smile flashes one last time before he’s gone. I exhale deeply, sinking into the chair behind me as my trembling legs give way.

“More like, what are you doing to me, Trayton King?” I sigh into the quiet space. My phone pings, and I fumble to grab it, anxious to see his notes. When I open the email, the world around me seems to freeze.

I read his notes, and as each word lands, unshed tears burn in my eyes.

All this time, I believed it meant nothing to him.

But it did.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Trayton

It's the first pre-season game, and I'm buzzing with excitement. Training sessions are great, but nothing compares to the thrill of playing against our rivals. Supposedly, it's a friendly match, but anyone familiar with ice hockey knows there's nothing friendly about it, especially when facing the Arctic Bears. "Do you smell that?" Cope asks, sniffing the air theatrically. Everyone joins in, while Coach just rolls his eyes. "I smell victory," Cope declares, thumping his chest like a gorilla, prompting everyone to cheer and mimic his gesture. My gaze sweeps over the team, soaking in the adrenaline we always feel before a game, and then it settles on him. Lately, my eyes always find him. I swallow hard as his face lights up, his eyes wide with excitement as everyone around him jumps and shouts. My smile fades as the noise and movement around me dull, and it's like I'm seeing him through tunnel vision. His smile brings a sense of calm, quieting my chaotic thoughts. But then his smile vanishes as Cope pulls him to his feet, forcing him into the spotlight he hates. Cope lifts his arms like a puppet, and Daxton frowns, muttering at Cope, who, unsurprisingly, ignores him. I can't help but laugh. He looks awkward but somehow belongs here, as if he's always been part of our team, supporting us from the sidelines. I can't imagine him not being here. My Daxton trance is cut short as Coach's voice booms through the locker room.

“I’m not here to give a big speech,” he announces as his gaze sweeps over all of us. “Play fair—skate rough. No swinging fists, and I want no bloodshed,” he bellows.

“We kill them by winning,” Kal shouts, and we all grip our sticks in response.

“Daxton,” Cope calls, turning toward him. “Today, your guy is putting in time on the ice.” Cope arches his eyebrows, and the moment Daxton’s eyes meet mine at the words “your guy,” my heart skips a beat—though it shouldn’t—and I find the sensation thrilling. We haven’t really defined what we are to each other, but deep down, I know it’s more than anything I’ve experienced before. I just can’t figure out how to navigate it yet.

“Mike is not my guy,” Daxton mumbles, frowning up at Cope, who looms over him.

“But you were out pretty late that night,” Cope teases with a smirk. Daxton’s cheeks flush bright red as his gaze locks with mine. I catch a slight tilt of his lips before he quickly looks away. *One.* My eyes drift over to Kal and Brayden—since Kal mentioned he saw Daxton leaving that night—and both grin at me before shifting their attention back to Daxton, whose eyes bounce between me, Cope, Kal, and Brayden as his blush deepens, before he finally smiles at me. *Two.*

“I thought Daxton wasn’t feeling well that night—wasn’t it a sore throat or something?” I interject. Kal bursts into wild laughter while Brayden chuckles silently, shaking his head. Daxton’s eyes widen in shock as he stares at me, the redness creeping further down his neck. Cope narrows his eyes, first at me, then at Dax, seemingly ready to interrogate him. But before he can, I almost blurt out to everyone that he was with me that night. Then Coach cuts in, urging us to move along. As I walk past Dax, I wink and tease, “Hope that throat is better.” He shakes his head, and I don’t miss the way he bites his cheek to stifle a smile. *Three.*

Outside on the rink, the Artic Bears strut around with an air of confidence that’s almost laughable. We’re up five-one and haven’t even broken a sweat.

I’m pretty sure I could take them on while nursing a hangover and still dominate the ice. Bray glides through the middle with a carefree smile, as if this were just another practice session for us. He glances my way and shakes his head as one of the Bears’ defensemen barrels toward him. Effortlessly, Bray ducks and weaves, slicing the puck over to me through a clear opening. The moment that puck hits my stick, it bounces straight off and slips right between the goalie’s legs. I raise my hands in a playful taunt as I skate past their bench. “What the fuck is going on with you lot?” Maybe a little provocation will fire them up. I pass by Daxton and flash him a wink, which causes him to smile as he drops his head, no doubt to hide the blush that creeps up his cheeks. *Four.*

Then, as I turn, I’m whacked hard on my shoulder—not enough to send me sprawling, but enough to make me stagger a few steps on the ice.Ah, Mike Grady. I can’t help but wonder why he suddenly seems so uptight. “Mikey boy,” I call out as I skate around him, before leaning in as our helmets collide. I come to a stop, pushing my shoulders forward. “You lot are playing like fucking kids—what’s happening?”

“Shut the fuck up, King,” he spits out as his eyes dart to the edge of the rink before narrowing back at me. I steal a sideways glance and see Daxton watching with those wide, innocent eyes. Mike starts skating away, but of course, I can’t seem to hold my tongue.

“Yeah, sorry about taking your date that night,” I call after him. “I had this ache I just couldn’t soothe, so I needed some help.” I smirk and casually run my hand across my jockstrap “He soothed it so fucking well. Every time the ache comes back, he eases it right away. I’d even go as far as saying he’s mastered it.”

My smirk widens as my mouthguard flashes at him, but his expression hardens into pure rage. Within two strides, his helmet collides with mine. “Well, I hope you cleaned yourself after,” he sneers. In an instant, my smirk vanishes.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I hiss through my helmet, but he does dare. He goes there. “Because I heard those trailer trash boys are pretty fucking rotten.” I catch a couple of sarcastic laughs from him before my head swings back and then snaps forward—a thunderous helmet clash ringing out.

Grady is thrown back, his skates slipping out from under him as he crashes to the ice. I waste no time; I drop on him, rip off his helmet in one

swift move, and let my fists rain blows across his face. By the fourth punch, blood spurts up and splatters across my face as chaos erupts around us, my teammates going wild while I continue landing shot after shot on Grady's face.

"Tray," his voice echoes from somewhere, but I ignore it.

"I'll put you in the hospital, you piece of fucking shit!" I scream. Grady raises his hands weakly to cover his face, barely even attempting to fight back.

"Tray," I hear Daxton call again as I feel arms tug at my jersey, but I shove them off hard, pulling back my aching fists and smashing them into Grady's face once more.

I only catch a glimpse of his face—smeared with blood, with rivulets sinking into the ice—before Kal, Bray, and Cope yank me up off my feet. My helmet has gone in the chaos. Even as I'm hauled away, my eyes remain fixed on the gruesome scene, and I spit angrily at him. "I damn well dare you to say that again," I growl.

"Trayton, snap out of it," Bray hisses, his hand gently cradling my face. "Breathe," he commands, his frantic, wide eyes locked on mine. I gulp in deep breaths, focusing solely on Brayden's expression.

"Dax," I murmur. His eyes soften, and he nods silently, urging.

"Come on." He guides me off the ice, wrapping one arm over my shoulder as we weave through the chaos of shouting and screaming. I barely register the surrounding voices as I search for Daxton.

When we pass through the locker room doors, my eyes immediately scan the area until I spot him: his head tilted back, a tissue pressed against his nose, with Coach on his knees in front of him, tilting his chin upward. Enraged again, I storm toward him, seething with the thought of turning back onto that rink to make every single person who even glanced his way pay. Without thinking, I step next to Coach and shove his hand aside. "Give me the name," I demand between ragged breaths.

Daxton rolls his eyes. "This is the least of my worries. You screwed up, Tray."

"Yeah, you did—get in my office right now," Coach booms into my ear.

"When I find out who hurt him, I'm going to come after them and tear them apart." I don't bother to look at Coach as I fix my gaze on Daxton.

"It doesn't matter, Tray, jus—"

Coach cuts him off. “You,” Coach roars beside me. “It was you who hurt him—office, now!” He gestures behind him, and my stomach drops with a cold dread as I turn back to Daxton.

“Who hurt you, Dax?”

“You hurt me the most.” The echoes of those words from the hotel haunt my mind. It’s true—I keep hurting him. But how the hell do I stop?

“I’m so sorry,” I croak, my head hanging low as I follow Coach to his office, desperate for a way to make it stop.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

Daxton

I sit in the locker room, waiting for Trayton to appear. He didn't intend to hurt me—I know that—even though Coach insisted it was deliberate, and judging by the way he's tearing into him through the thin door, Coach truly believes it was on purpose. I know it wasn't. I shouldn't have stepped onto the ice while everyone was fighting; the entire team was throwing punches. Sure, TV teams might have an occasional scrap, but every single player was in the brawl, like animals in a wild park. I pulled Trayton, who was on top of Mike, from behind. Isn't it a rule in a fight that you shouldn't grab someone from behind? When someone's caught up in rage, they won't register a feeble grip from the back. Still, I heard Trayton's actions fractured Mike's jaw and broke his nose. That's not going to go down well.

I let out a huff, tossing the tissue Coach shoved up my nose as I entered the locker room. Everyone's here, waiting—some sporting nasty bruises and cut hands, while Brayden nurses a cut lip. In the midst of it all, everyone's eyes are fixed on the floor. "How much trouble will he get in?" I mumble to anyone who'll listen.

"I don't think Grady's the problem—it's you. Coach and the dean already warned Tray," Kal says.

I let out a resigned sigh. "What are the odds Coach will believe me when I say it was an accident?" I mutter.

Kal chuckles lightly. “Good luck with that.” My shoulders slump in defeat. If they don’t take me seriously, I might withhold my project. The dean’s been enthusiastic ever since I explained how I wanted to present it.

We sit in silence until I notice something old and rustic on the floor. I lean in, squinting to see it better. “Don’t,” Brayden warns just as I reach down to pick it up. Holding the coin in my hand, I look toward Brayden with a frown. “It’s Tray’s,” he explains. “It must’ve fallen when he threw his helmet into his locker. No one’s supposed to touch the coin.” He winces as he continues.

“Why?” I ask, my brow furrowing as I turn the coin in my hand. Then everything around me comes to a halt. My breath catches as I stare at the coin in my hand. I study the words etched on it: Fuck Yes and Fuck No.

Kal murmurs softly beside me, “No one really knows what it means.”

Without thinking, a smile creeps onto my lips, and I whisper, “It means whatever he wants it to mean.”

“What did you just say?” Trayton’s voice slices through the silence, halting me in my tracks as my eyes flick to him—I hadn’t noticed he was there.

“I-I-” I stutter, unsure of what to say next.

“Can you repeat that?” he demands, his wide, frantic eyes searching my face, each second deepening the realization as his gaze lingers. “Daxton,” he utters urgently. At that moment, the coin falls from my hand, and I take off running. His hand brushes against me in a futile attempt to grab hold, but I flee from the locker room as if my very life depends on it. For all those years, he hadn’t known it was me; I had purposely kept my face hidden, too ashamed of the black eyes and cuts I carried from constant beatings.

“Daxton!” Trayton’s voice roars down the corridor as I continue to run. I don’t stop running until I finally bolt through the door of my dorm, not even five minutes later. Anxiety gnawing at me while I wonder how to face him and what words to offer. My mind races, and I find myself rummaging under my bed for my sketch pad. I flip to the page containing the tattoo design he requested—the one I promised I’d get to but never had time for. I actually completed it that very night after he explained all the details, still not believing that he wanted a drawing of the lighthouse. When I read the notes and saw a lighthouse, everything in me lit up, but then I convinced myself it could just be a nostalgic reference to his childhood. It didn’t have

anything to do with me. Now, as I study the drawing, it hits me that our nights together might have held more meaning for him than I ever imagined—especially the stars. We loved the stars. Every detail was there: the bright-red door with its conspicuous hole, the uneven brickwork at the top, and the broken railing. I had drawn it with the deep-seated knowledge that I could never truly give it to him. He would know as soon as he saw the drawing. And then he would eventually wonder why I never returned—even though the truth was, I did return, only to find him gone.

At that moment, Cope's key slips into the lock, and the door bursts open—not revealing Cope, but Trayton. A single tear escapes. I know right there and then, I'm going to tell him everything: the moment I must admit what a coward I was. His eyes scan my face, growing even paler as they eventually settle on the sketch pad in my hand, causing my breath to catch in my throat. I make no effort to hide my emotion as he steps forward slowly, carefully taking the pad from my grasp as though it were the most fragile treasure. His eyes move over the image of the lighthouse, a look of confusion briefly crossing his features as he alternates his gaze between the drawing and me—once again, then back to me.He drops the sketchpad onto my bed, his eyes scanning my face. "It's really you," he murmurs, his shoulders drooping and his hands hanging limply at his sides. I look down, swallowing hard, with a flush of shame as I nod.

"Quiet Boy," he whispers again—how strange that my old nickname still fits, and he never realized it was me. "Wh-Why?" he stammers, then lets out a soft laugh as he sinks onto the bed, his gaze drifting back to the open pad and the drawing of the lighthouse. "And you knew it was me all along?" he asks, his eyes meeting mine.

"Yeah," I reply, my voice barely audible.

He reaches into his sweater pocket and retrieves a folded piece of paper. "I found a sketchpad at the rink a few months back and found this picture inside. It's similar to the one at the tattoo shop. I recognized it immediately, and now everything's clear," he explains, studying the image of the lake, trees, and the light piercing through—the lighthouse. "No bullshit," he says, jaw tensing. "Tell me everything. I'm not leaving this room until you explain why you never fucking told me it was you." I nod, my lip trembling slightly.

"I was so happy the night I met you," I confess, locking eyes with him even as his frown deepens, as if my words hurt him. "I'd never experienced

any joy in my life; it felt like everything was wrapped in darkness. Then you opened that door in the lighthouse, and damn, your smile shone brighter than any beacon for me that night." I watch as his fists clench. All I want is to interlock my hands with his, but I hold back, gripping my own tightly instead. "For two months, every day you came up there. You were the only good thing in my life."

"Really? So you left because I was the only good thing for you?" he says, sarcasm oozing from him.

"Remember the night I gave you that coin, and when we left the lighthouse, you kissed my cheek and whispered thank you?" I say this, still recalling the softness of his lips on my cheek and the way my heart pounded within me. Trayton gulps and nods.

"Marley was parked nearby—he had been watching us. I can't even recall how long, but he was there the whole time." I wince at the memory of Marley pulling up while I was walking back to the trailer and taking me home. "He told my dad he saw me kissing a boy. My dad beat me so badly that Bex had to drag me to the hospital the next day. I was in so much pain—he broke my ribs." I laugh bitterly. "Obviously, we were young and clueless about the fallout that would follow. Within hours, child welfare services were at the trailer door."

"How did you manage not to be taken away from him?" Tray demands, his tone sharp and brimming with anger.

"I was just a trailer park kid, Tray—we often end up slipping through the cracks." I offer him a tight smile. "My dad started tracking my every move. He told me he'd kill me if I ever came near you again. 'No son of mine will be a fag,' he'd roar. And Marley made a point of reminding him that he had a fag for a son—he did it intentionally. From that day on, Marley hated me and even enjoyed it when my dad beat me." I exhale deeply, wishing I didn't have to dredge up these painful memories, but if sharing them helps Tray understand even a little of what drove me, I'll endure the agony. "I went back later, after I'd healed and after my dad finally stopped watching me like a hawk, but you weren't there."

Tray's jaw tightens. "I went back every day for a month," he whispers. My heart shatters at those words—knowing that he cared enough to care about me being gone, yet all I can picture is him waiting at the lighthouse, and the pain is almost physical. I press my hand to my chest.

"I'm sorry," I murmur.

“I hate that you had to go through all this, and I’m sorry you did, Dax,” he says, his eyes meeting mine, tears welling up. “But you had so many chances to tell me, especially when I was with Bray and Bexley.” I nod silently, recalling Brayden’s words at the graveside: *“I know for a fact he wouldn’t want you holding onto this.*”

“I’m sorry, Bex,” I whisper, and Tray frowns. “I always felt like someone up there resented me.” I gesture upward at the ceiling. “I remember spotting you outside Bray’s trailer a few months later. At first, the panic hit me when I thought Marley might see you, but then excitement surged through me—I took it as a sign that I had truly seen you.” I smile as I recall the moment when my heart fluttered upon catching sight of him through my window. “Then Bex burst into my trailer and barreled into my room. I was so excited to tell him that the boy I had talked about from the lighthouse was outside his trailer. But then he said, ‘That’s the boy, Dax, the one I told you about at the ice rink.’ My heart sank when I heard him say that because he had always spoken so highly of that incredible boy he met at the ice rink.” I tug at my sleeves as I look up at Tray. He closes his eyes and sighs deeply. “Bex was my only friend; he helped me so much. He was my best friend, and I just couldn’t find the words to tell him I saw you first. So I swallowed my pain and smiled at him, saying that you looked exactly as wonderful as he’d described. Little did he know, I already knew just how amazing you were.” My lip trembles as the emotions spill out. “I thought you might recognize me, which is why I tried to keep a low profile whenever you were around the trailer park.”

“Back then, I would have known that smile,” he says, throwing his head back in laughter. “Remember that day at the rink when I found you lying on the ice? You had your hood up, and your smile reminded me of the boy on —” he pauses, then corrects himself, “It reminded me of you.” He sighs, his laughter fading. “I didn’t see much of your face; you always hid yourself.”

“Because I didn’t want you to see my cuts and black eyes,” I reply. Tray nods, understanding, as he glances around my room, trying to piece everything together. “There’s more,” I say, meeting Tray’s gaze as he raises an eyebrow slightly. “No bullshit.” I echo his earlier words. “The kiss with Bex,” I admit. Tray fixes me with a hard stare, keeping me frozen in place. “It wasn’t what you think. Bex asked me to kiss him and make sure you saw.” Tray’s eyes widen in confusion, his brows furrowing.

“What?”

“Bex knew he was spiraling with the drugs and didn’t want to pull you into it. He saw the stress it caused Brayden and didn’t want you to suffer the same, so he needed to make you hate him,” I explain softly. Tray shakes his head, looking completely shocked.

“That’s messed up. Why didn’t he just talk to me?” He frowns.

“Would you have let him go if he had?” I ask, knowing Tray well enough to realize he wouldn’t have. He would have done everything possible to help Bexley, only to end up broken, just like Brayden. “Bexley was an addict, Tray. It’s an illness. And he dragged Brayden down with him. He didn’t want to do the same to you.” A tear slips down my cheek. “I wasn’t an addict, but I grew up surrounded by that life. I was already deep in that mess.”

“But you were looking at me.”

“Because I wanted to be kissing you,” I confess. “I craved so much for you to be the one.”

“Your eyes were so intense—I thought you were savoring every moment of my torment. Now it all makes sense.” He drops his head. “I can’t believe you never told me,” he whispers, his eyes fixed on a spot across the room while his jaw clenches. “I opened up so much when we were up at that lighthouse—I bared everything to you. You have no idea what a lifeline you were for me back then, Dax.”

He frowns at the picture as if replaying all those moments, as though he’s reliving our past.

“I was lonely, confused, and utterly miserable until you came along and lit up my days, making all the chaos a little less overwhelming. You’re the reason I realized I liked boys, the reason I discovered I was gay and not the broken kid I thought I was. You weren’t alone in falling that night—Dax, I fell so completely for you.” He laughs again as I choke on a sob. “I always found it ironic that I fell for someone whose face I only saw in part, yet you had this calm presence. You were quiet, but your entire aura spoke to me. It was like I could feel my own pain mirrored in you, like I finally had someone who understood me.” He studies me, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I know you went through hell, Dax, and I’m truly sorry for that—I really am. But I wish you had told me.”

I shake my head as tears spill down my face. “I promised Bex, with everything I had, that I wouldn’t reveal anything about that kiss. He was so happy when he met you—I couldn’t take that from him.”

“At the hotel, you asked me what I felt when I thought of that person, and I told you pain.” He pauses and wipes his face with the back of his sleeve. “It was you I thought of. Every time I think of you, it hurts—so fucking much. You were the boy who burst into my world, with that damn adorable smile that made my eleven-year-old stomach flip and those rosy cheeks that stirred butterflies.”

He points to his chest. “So why don’t you ask who hurt me, Dax?”

I shake my head, my sobs catching in my throat.

“Ask me,” he hisses softly.

“Who-who hurt you?” I whisper it barely audible, as if saying it louder might make the truth unbearable. The room feels heavy with unspoken words, and my heart pounds in my chest.

“You.” He spits the word out with a sharp bitterness that cuts through the silence. “You hurt me the most, Dax.” His gaze pierces through me as he throws my own words back at me, rising from my bed and moving for the door with a determined stride.

“It was always you,” I scream, my voice raw and desperate, as I rise to my feet. I refuse to let him shift all the blame onto me. “You don’t think I didn’t break every time I saw you two together?” I shout, my voice quivering with emotion. “Every smile, every touch you both shared, it felt like a dagger to my heart, shattering it into a million irreparable pieces. It was like drowning in a sea of unrequited love, each wave dragging me further under, suffocating me.” My chest tightens as I struggle to breathe through my confession. “But I couldn’t forget about you, no matter how hard I tried, no matter how many times I told myself I hated you because it was easier than admitting I cared.” Tears spill freely down my cheeks, and my hands shake as I throw them up in frustration.

Tray stands by the door, frozen, his eyes softening as he listens. I point a trembling finger to my chest, my voice rising with urgency. “Me,” I manage to say, my voice cracking with the weight of the admission. “I loved you first.” A sob racks my body, nearly doubling me over. “I loved you first,” I repeat. “It was always you, and you don’t understand how it feels to know it was never me.”

“But it was.” His voice is a soft echo in the room. “No one could ever be you. It was always you, deep down, Dax. You became a ghost in my life, and I was haunted by you every fucking day.” Tears stream down his face as he looks at me one last time, his hand gripping the door handle. He pulls it

open and steps out, leaving me behind with his confession hanging in the air. As the door closes, the sound of finality rolls through the room, and I’m left standing here, feeling the full weight of heartbreak descend upon me. My heart crumbles into tiny shards of glass scattering at my feet, a painful reminder of what it means to truly love and lose.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Trayton

Kal hands me a beer and opens another for himself and Bray as they both sit beside me. I've just finished telling them everything. I couldn't return to this room without talking to the two people who entered my life and stayed. It was tough for Brayden to hear about Bexley's role in all of this, but he knew Daxton was hiding something. That's when he mentioned seeing Daxton at the grave a while back. Kal, always the logical one, asked me to put myself in Daxton's position and think about if it was him or Bray. Would I break their hearts by admitting the boy was mine first? Would I risk losing the only friend who, as Brayden put it, willingly walked into that web and stayed with me? Kal pointed out how young we all were too. We had to grow up quickly because that was just how it was for us. We were determined boys whose parents gave us freedom, and when Kal and I met Bray, we saw a lot we weren't familiar with. Kal and I grew up with wealth, big houses, and cars, while Bray, Bex, and Daxton didn't. So when we spent time at the trailer park, we witnessed a lot of harsh realities, but we were still so young. I had a lot of emotions for such a young person, and I truly believe my mom influenced that. She always talked about her feelings and love. I was raised to think love was the most important thing in the world, and then I began to resent it because, in my view, love led to pain. People would come into your life, make you love them, and then leave. So would I have said anything if I were in Daxton's place? No, I wouldn't because Kal and Bray mean everything to me.

But that doesn’t mean it hurts any less.

“Dax has been through so much more than any of us, Tray. You can’t hold it against him for holding onto any bit of goodness that crossed his path.”

“I know.” I exhale heavily. “I just can’t wrap my head around the fact that he was there the whole time.”

“I remember you talking about Lighthouse Boy.” Kal nods, then points at me, wide-eyed. “Oh my god.” He stares at me in shock. “You used to call him Quiet Boy.”

Brayden inhales sharply. “If that isn’t fate, then I don’t know what is.” I can’t help but smirk because they’re right. The fact that I still call Daxton Quiet Boy now and then, just like I used to—it feels strange and surreal. But I do see it as a sign that he may have left me once, but he’s really come back.

“I need to see him,” I snap, sitting up abruptly. “Now.”

“All right, all right,” Kal and Bray rise, gently pushing me back onto the bed. “We’ll head to the bar, and you text Daxton, ask him to come here. Cope mentioned he’s not doing well, so be gentle with him,” Kal advises, grabbing his coat. I reach for my phone and pull up his number. There’s so much I want to show, but right now, all I need is him. I need to see him, to hold him. I wish I could untangle the chaos in my mind, but I can’t. Words have never been my strong suit, especially when it comes to feelings. I remember during the interview when I asked him what love meant, and his response. Maybe I can show him instead.

M

Dax, I think the world’s ending.

Ten minutes later, there’s a knock at my door. I take a deep breath before opening it, and there’s Daxton, looking utterly shattered. “You came.”

“You said the world’s ending,” he whispers. I step aside to let him in, and as soon as the door closes, I pull him into my arms and hold him so tightly.

“You came back to me.” I lean my forehead against his. “You left, but you came back.” I breathe him in.

“I never truly left, Tray.” I cradle Daxton’s face, bringing our lips close, and press mine gently against his. He clutches my arms tightly, as if afraid I’ll vanish if he lets go. “I’m here,” I murmur, planting soft kisses along his cheek. Tears stream from his eyes as his smile shines brightly at me, and I tenderly brush them away with my lips. *Five.*

“I love you, Tray.” His words pierce straight to my heart, igniting a burning throb. I know what I feel for him is stronger than anything I’ve ever felt. But

love’s always been a puzzle to me. It’s not something I’ve ever worked out. Instead of speaking, I express my emotions through actions. My lips meet his, delicately parting his mouth as my tongue explores, drawing a deep sigh from him, his shoulders relaxing. His fingers weave through my hair, performing that soothing motion I adore, raking gently across my scalp. Our tongues dance together, and I entwine mine with his, communicating through this embrace what my voice cannot. The kiss tells him what he means to me.

“I need you,” I murmur against his lips while I guide him back to the bed. When we reach it, I spin around so that I fall backward, with Daxton straddling me. He pushes into me, and I lift to meet him. I can’t get enough of him, of his body against mine, and I hate that it took us so long to get here. But now we’re here, and I’m never letting go—I’ll never let him leave my life again.Daxton grips my top, pulling it off as I do the same to him. Our bodies merge, and I trace my hands over his skin, over his tattoos and the nipple piercings I shouldn’t have overlooked. The moment my fingertips brush them, he gasps—I know he loves it. I let my thumbs caress his nipples as I savor the soft sounds that escape him, our mouths colliding more desperately with every kiss.“How do you want me, Tray?” He pants.

“I want you inside me, Dax,” I reply, running my hands through his hair as he looks down at me.

“Really?” His eyes light up as they flicker between mine. A smile spreading broadly on his face. *Six.*

“Really,” I confirm with a smile, letting my hands wander over his scalp. “I want you in every way, including inside me.” Daxton grins as he showers my cheeks and jaw with soft kisses that trail down my body, leaving goose bumps in their wake. *Seven.* Every kiss makes me tremble until his warm lips finally wrap around my hard cock. I sink back into the pillow, lost in the sensation of his wet, inviting mouth. After taking me completely, he resumes his kisses, now moving down to plant them gently on my balls. With firm hands holding my thighs, he lifts them to open me up, draping my legs over his shoulders as he leans forward. He parts me slowly, taking his time to press soft kisses along my skin, sending shivers down my spine with his delicate, tender touch.

He starts by licking me tentatively, then more boldly, until the overwhelming pleasure makes my legs lock up. I push against his tongue, urging him on. “Fuck, Dax, that feels so good.” I breathe, my words spurring him on as he moves from my balls back up to my opening, repeating his motions until I tremble uncontrollably. “Shit… shit… shit,” I murmur. “Dax, fuck, I need you inside me.” I moan, desperate to feel every part of him.

Suddenly, he sits up, his eyes wide with passion as they lock onto my face and my whole body.

“Fuck, Tray. I want to eat you from the outside in, and I don’t think that would even be enough,” he says, his fingers teasing around my hole. “Lube?” he asks.

“Top drawer,” I reply. In a rush, Daxton opens the top drawer, grabs a bottle, and quickly squeezes some onto his finger. All I can think about is his cock inside me, not his fingers. “Please, Dax. I need you, not your fingers.” His eyes meet mine, burning with desire as he clenches his jaw.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he reassures me before gently pushing a finger inside.

“Fuck, it feels weird.” I inhale sharply as he adds a second, slowly sliding them in and out. “More,” I beg, beads of sweat forming on my forehead. With a third finger, and the way he opens them up inside me, stretching me, I know I can’t wait any longer. “Dax, fuck, fuck me,” I blurt out, and he angles his fingers perfectly as he smirks.

“So needy,” he teases, an infuriating smirk tipping upon his lips before his expression turns serious as he lines himself up with me. *Eight.* He pushes in slowly, each inch filling me deeper. As he tunnels in, he breathes heavily and stares down at me with intense, wide, green eyes.

“Please move,” I prompt. Daxton closes his eyes, fighting to keep himself under control—it’s a struggle I understand because I feel like I might fall apart just watching him. I feel his piercing thrust along the inside as he pulls out, and then when he pushes back in, my whole world lights up. “Holyfuckingshit.”

“Tray,” Dax murmurs, his face softening as he slowly withdraws and then thrusts into me again. Each time, his hips send ripples of pleasure that make my eyes roll back.

“You don’t know how good you feel inside me, Dax.” I pant, running my hands along his arms. “I can feel you everywhere.” Daxton thrusts into me hard, his pelvis snapping perfectly into place as he bottoms out each time. I arch my back off the bed as he positions himself with his arms on either side of my head, his face pressed against mine and his wild eyes locking me in place. Every time he pulls out and then pushes back in, filling me up, he kisses me on my cheek, my lips, my forehead, and my neck. With every thrust, his kisses cover me, and I can honestly say I’ve never experienced sex that feels this incredible. Being so connected to Daxton makes me feel whole, like I finally found the missing piece of me.

I feel right. I feel complete. Then I pull Daxton’s head back and stare at him, really looking into his eyes. The words are right on the tip of my tongue —I know I love him—but I can’t seem to say them, afraid that admitting it might make him leave. I close my eyes, trying to push those thoughts away as I whisper,

“Harder, Dax.” I open my eyes and add, “Fuck me like you love me.” Daxton lifts me, hooking both of my legs over his shoulders as he snaps his hips forward in one strong thrust. His moan fills the room as his hard body grinds over every sensitive spot.

“Your ass is squeezing me so tight. I wish you could see how well your ass swallows my cock, Tray. It’s like it’s craving more and pulls me in deeper every time I try and pull out.” He pants, his breathing growing heavier as his moans intensify and sweat drips down his head. “I want you to come for me, Tray. I want you to make a mess for me.” He’s going to end me with that mouth of his.

“Daxton, fuckshitfuck.” I grip my own cock and match his pace as our movements get more frantic. His jaw clenches, and his hands grip my thighs firmly.

“I’m going to come inside you, Trayton.” Dax groans, his fingers tightening even more.

“Harder,” I cry out, my hand moving frantically as my body buzzes with desire. “Ahhhh fuckkkkk,” Dax rasps, his hips slamming into me once, twice, until I finally tip over the edge. My legs tense on his shoulders as I come hard, my cum shooting out. Daxton’s movements slow, and he pants over me as he gently lowers my legs and slips himself out of me, causing me to wince from the burn I know I’m going to be feeling for a while. He wipes his head, staring down at me and the undeniable proof of our connection.

“You look so damn perfect,” he murmurs, lowering his lips to mine. He kisses me deeply, then trails his lips down my neck and chest, moving lower to where the cum is, licking it all up. His tongue glides across my stomach, and he moans with every swipe. My dick twitches, somehow springing back to life, already half-hard. Daxton moves up, his face so close to mine. “I’ll never stop loving your taste,” he says. I grab the back of his neck and crash my lips onto his, tasting myself on him. I don’t care because he’s so damn hot, too much of everything. As our tongues tangle, I realize with complete certainty: he was meant to find me again, to come here and fix what was broken. After a moment, Daxton rolls beside me, and we both lie there in silence, trying to catch our breath. Dax tilts his head upward, and I slide my

arm around his shoulder, drawing him close as we lie together in a gentle silence. His hand slowly moves upward, tracing the small tattoo on my chest.

“You said it’s a star map, but what was the reason behind it?” he asks softly.“I-” I stutter, and then I lean in to whisper, “You.” He sits up, brow furrowing as he watches me.

“What?” I smile and reply,

“It’s the star map from the night we met at the lighthouse.” His face fills with awe as his eyes glisten.

“You’re kidding.” He breathes, astonishment coloring his tone. I shake my head gently.

“I told you what you meant to me.” His fingers glide over the tiny pattern etched on my skin.

“I can’t believe you have it—when did you get it?” A light laugh escapes me as memories rush back: that reckless day when I strolled into a tattoo shop, underage and determined, tossing them an extra hundred bucks.

“Fifteen,” I say, a mischievous smile tugging at my lips. Dax frowns playfully.

“But you were with Bex back then, right?”

“Like I said,” I whisper, my tone soft and tender, “those nights on the lighthouse with you meant more than you can imagine. I needed a piece of you to hold on to forever.” My voice wavers as I see the glisten of unshed tears in his eyes. “Dax.” My heart aches to confess a love too deep for words—even speaking it feels like it might break me. “Dax,” I repeat quietly.

“Shh, I know, Tray. You don’t have to say it,” he murmurs, his tone warm and understanding. He presses a gentle kiss on the star map on my chest. “Our stars,” he marvels before leaning forward to share a soft kiss on my lips. “You know, you just gave me my first,” he confesses, his head resting against my chest.

“What?” I ask in confusion.

“I’ve never been on top before,” he admits shyly. I lean back, gently tugging his shoulder until his gaze meets mine. His rosy cheeks—my favorite sight—shine back at me.

“I got a first.” I grin, my chest swelling with both tenderness and disbelief. Finally, I have a first.

“You’ve given me so many firsts,” he whispers softly. He starts listing hesitantly, “First guy who kissed me—even if it was just a peck on the cheek; the first guy I loved; the first who broke my heart; the first guy’s dick I sucked.”

“What?” I interject in utter shock. Dax peers up at me.

“That night, right here, after you lied about your tattoo,” he recalls with a soft laugh. God, it was his first time sucking a dick, and I’d treated him like that.

“Dax, damn… I—” I begin.

“Don’t,” he cuts in lightly, his laughter bright and genuine. *Nine.* “I loved it. More than you can imagine.” His tone softens as he sighs. “I wish I could call one of your firsts mine.” I freeze.

“You’ve had three.”

Daxton sits up sharply, twisting and staring down at me. “What?”

“The first guy who broke my heart,” I murmur, gazing up at him as the memories flood my mind. “That night at the hotel—that was the very first time I ever made love to someone,” I confess, “and you were the first boy I ever loved.” Daxton stares at me, a tear slipping free. It’s like he doesn’t know whether to cry or smile at the confession. A small smile breaks free on his lips, and I grab his chin, pulling him closer. “Ten.”

“What?”

“I make a mental list every morning when I wake up of things I want to complete during the day. Ever since the morning at the hotel, my list has been consumed of you. Today it was to make you smile ten times.” Another tear slips free again. “I don’t want to hurt you anymore, Dax. I just want to make you smile. I fell in love with your smile at the age of eleven. It’s something I don’t want to go a day without seeing again.”

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Daxton

When Trayton left my dorm room earlier today, I really believed it would be the final time I ever saw him. I thought it marked the end of it all, and even though that realization shattered me into unthinkable pieces, I also felt relieved to finally set down the burden I'd been carrying. Confessing to Trayton—even if it sounds strange—that I was the one who fell in love with him first brought a freedom I hadn't expected. I had hidden everything behind a mask of hatred because admitting I cared and loved him hurt too much when I knew it would always be one-sided. That moment made me understand that love and hate are just two sides of the same coin, and until now, I never truly knew which side I was on.

I love Trayton King completely and unconditionally. I'm not sure where we stand now, but I know I'll accept whatever he gives me, and it doesn't matter how long it takes him to come to terms with it; I'm willing to wait. After all, I've already waited nearly ten years—what's a few more? As I walk down the corridor, I bite my cheek to hide my awkwardness as people stare at me, only to realize that I'm grinning like a loon. I try to hide my smile, but the butterflies won't stop fluttering inside me. I have finally admitted it to myself. I have finally told him. God, I feel free.

While jogging down the stairs and out the front door, I start heading back to my dorm when my phone rings. Glancing at the screen, I see Trayton's name, and despite trying, my smile just keeps growing. I answer shyly with a soft hi.

“Hey.” His reply is deep and husky, making goose bumps ripple down my back with its sleepy tone. “Do you want to grab something to eat in an hour?” I burst out laughing but swallow it quickly, not believing how giddy I feel.

“Yeah,” I reply, clearing my throat. “That would be nice.”

“Great,” he says, followed by a moment of silence. Then he adds, laughing, “Is it odd to say that I kind of miss you already?” He quickly corrects himself. “Forget that—I actually cringed after saying it.”

“I miss you, too… a lot.”

“Yeah?” he says happily.

“Yeah, Tray.”

“You could have taken a shower here—with me—it would’ve saved time.” His murmur is gravelly.

“Don’t tempt me,” I quip, knowing I’d be back in a flash, though it likely wouldn’t end with dinner—and I’m pretty hungry. A deep, chuckling grunt ripples through the phone, and I swear it sends a jolt straight to my cock.

“Quickly, get ready and be back within an hour,” he instructs before hanging up. I reach to put the phone away, but it rings again.

“If you keep chatting, it’ll take me longer—”

“Daxton,” Marley’s voice commands, sending a chill down my spine as it fills the line. In a burst of panic, I hang up immediately and stare at the screen. A private number calls once more; I let it ring out as I carry on. Then a text pings.

Unknown number:

Look up.

My body stiffens, and I freeze where I stand, snapping my head upward. Scanning the area, my eyes catch him through the gate—he’s there, leaning against his car. Another text from the unknown number arrives:

Don’t leave me waiting. I will walk through that gate and come get you myself.

I know the threat isn’t empty. Marley would actually do it; he’s always acted above the law, convinced of his own untouchability and unconcerned with the damage he leaves in his wake. My entire body trembles as I take the first step toward him, knowing that this could very well be the biggest mistake I make.

Perhaps all he wants is to talk.

I glance around cautiously, making sure no familiar faces are about. The last thing I need is Trayton catching wind of this and thinking I'm back in bed with that life—he'd assume I'm dealing for them again. I've just got him, and I can't risk losing him now.

You've been ignoring his calls—the very thing he told you never to do.

I square my shoulders and lift my head as I walk to Marley. I need to get this over with, absorb any blow he dishes out, and then figure out the excuse I'll give Trayton. I only have to get this done, head back to my dorm to get ready, and then go on my first date with Trayton. Just the thought of that date sends a flurry of butterflies fluttering in my stomach. I can do this. Whatever Marley does, I'll take it and walk away—just like I've done before.

I head through the gate, and there he stands—a rugged-looking Marley, eyes blazing with fury. He tilts his head toward his car, pulls open the driver's side door, and gets in. My heart trembles at the memory of what he did the last time I was in that car. His window rolls down.

"Get. In," he growls, and I quickly circle the car. I take a big breath and lower into the seat. I set my shoulders, bracing myself in case his hand darts around to grab the back of my neck—but it never comes.

Instead, the doors slam shut and lock immediately.

"Look, Marley…" I manage to say through a sharp pain, and then everything goes black.

***My eyes slowly flutter open as sharp pain surges through my head. I feel a warm liquid trickling down my neck as I scan the familiar confines of my old trailer. My arms protest fiercely against the tight bindings around my wrists.

What happened?

I glance to my left and see my dad, restrained in a chair just like me, his gaze locked on the table in front of him. On the table lie three colored wraps—heroin. "Dad," I call out; the volume makes me wince. He doesn't respond; he just continues to stare at the wraps. "Dad," I say again, softer this time.

Slowly, his head turns, revealing a lifeless expression. Instead of the man I once knew, I see nothing but an empty shell—a figure that evokes memories of someone I never truly had the words for. Has he fallen so far into drugs that his mind is completely lost? His vacant eyes turn and remain fixed on the three colored wraps as if they're silently mocking him.

"Dad, what's going on?" I ask as I tug at the bindings that refuse to budge.

"I didn't mean to," he replies defensively while his eyes stay fixed on the wraps—sunken, black, and red. I need him to explain the situation. It's easy

enough to guess who put us here, but where is that person, and what is the purpose behind all this?

“Snap out of it,” I hiss. I wouldn’t have dared speak to him so roughly when I was living under his roof, but now he appears so weak, so fragile—completely broken—that even a child might overpower him.

A noise jolts my attention, and I turn as Marley steps into the room. With a black coat, gloves, and an aura of cold aggression, he doesn’t even spare me a glance. Instead, he strides to the kitchen, clattering about with something, before returning to the living area.

“Marley,” I croak. “What is going on? I’ll do whatever you need—just let us go.” His eyes meet mine briefly, and they’re more soulless than I remember. Then his gaze shifts back to my dad, who offers a weak smirk.

“That old man is in a bad way,” Marley remarks as if it weren’t obvious. “What did he tell you, Dax?” he continues, tilting his head. I frown and reply, “N-nothing?” I lock eyes with him. Marley despises a lack of eye contact. He says it’s a matter of respect, something he surprisingly seems to value. So I keep my eyes on him.

“Not one word?” he challenges, raising an eyebrow as if I’m lying.

“He just mumbled something about not meaning to do it and insisting it’s not his fault.” Marley nods slowly, his eyes drifting back to my dad.

“And what exactly did you not mean to do, Karl?” he taunts. My dad’s head jerks toward him.

“You made me do it,” he confesses weakly.

“Mmm, that’s just what you keep telling yourself,” Marley replies; Dad’s eyes are once again drawn to the colored wraps.

“Why is he looking at them like that?”

“What do those wraps mean, Daxton?” I gulp, looking back at the white, black, and blue wraps.

“They show the strength of the heroin.”

“And what’s the one on there that could kill you if we don’t mix it before selling it to our customers?”

I frown. “The black one,” I say because I’ve always known. Marley imports it from abroad, and its strength is dangerously high. We can’t sell it as it is; it needs to be mixed first. The blue is weak, meant for newcomers, but it’s still priced high. The white is potent enough to keep addicts returning. We never sell the black one in its pure form.

“Karl, why don’t you tell Daxton about when you gave someone the black content disguised as white?” I take a sharp breath and turn to my dad, who’s

trembling with sobs.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, he did.” Karl chuckles. “Go on, tell your son who you gave it to. Tell him how you were so furious they were leaving and refused to sell for us anymore that you gave them a farewell gift.” Marley keeps talking, but the realization hits me hard. My dad’s screams sound distant.

He wouldn’t.

Not Bex.

Not my best friend.

My stomach turns as the truth settles in—my dad was enraged when Bexley decided to leave to get better. It all fits now, in the worst way possible.

“No,” I whisper amid the chaos. “Dad, tell me it’s not true.”

But his silence says it all. I search his face for any denial but find only guilt and shame.

Marley’s laughter rings out like a cruel soundtrack to this nightmare. “Oh, it’s true. Your old man made sure your friend got a special farewell gift. Wrapped up nice and tight, wasn’t it?”

Sickness explodes from my mouth as I collapse forward, retching and shuddering while his sobs echo around us. I lean dangerously close, bile streaking down my sweater, silently pleading that none of this is real.

“He made me do it. He told me to,” he insists.

“Oh, those lies, Karl. Look where they’ve brought you.” Marley sneers in a condescending tone. “Look at your son, Karl. Look at what you’ve done—he was the only boy who cared, and now you’ve taken him away. You always hated Daxton having a friend, never liked anyone around him—especially someone like him. I bet he was… doing things behind your back every night, and you just couldn’t stand it, could you?” Marley hisses, prodding my dad as his cries of “no, no, no” grow louder with each repetition.

“Your dad wrote a letter and sent it to the police, trying to explain that everything just became too much.” My dad can’t write. He can’t spell. My dad wouldn’t have written a letter. But Marley would have.

“This is all you!” I scream, my voice torn between anger and despair as spit flies from my lips. Marley’s laugh comes out dark and calculated, the sound of pure malice.

He reaches into his pocket and produces two needles. Moving to my dad, he whispers, “It got too hard for you, didn’t it, Karl? You just couldn’t live with it anymore.” My dad, overwhelmed by guilt, nods silently as tears stream down his face. “You just wanted it all to disappear.” Marley bends

over my dad, untying the ropes from the chair, and slips on two straps tightly around each arm.

“Marley, don’t,” I beg, desperation cracking me in two. “We can fix this. We won’t tell anyone, just please don’t do this.”

But even as I plead, Marley forces a needle into my dad’s arm and, without pause, injects the full contents into him. I watch helplessly, eyes brimming with tears, as Marley winks before repeating the act on the other arm with the second syringe.

My dad convulses in the chair, his body jerking violently—once, twice, and then a third time. Foam begins to froth around his mouth, his head tilts to the side, and his eyes, frozen in place, lock onto mine while a single tear escapes. I watch in horror as his final breath slips away, leaving his unblinking eyes to stare into nothingness.

He’s gone.

Tears stream down my face. Not for him, but for Bexley. I regret ever letting him get tangled in this mess of a family, this cursed life of mine. How did it come to this?

“Is that how Bexley looked? You saw him, didn’t you? You saw him lifeless in his bed?” Anger surges through me, my body shaking in its bonds. I plead silently for them to snap, just so I can end Marley. I’d do it, even if it meant spending forever locked away, just to watch him take his last breath. He laughs, his eyes fixed on me like I’m a helpless lamb on its way to the slaughter. There’s no escape.

“And then there’s you.” Marley’s expression darkens as he strides to the kitchen. The sound of liquid pouring reaches my ears, and then the unmistakable scent hits me. Gasoline.

He reappears with containers, dousing the trailer, drenching me, the sharp odor stinging my senses as I turn my head away.

“Marley!” I scream, panic creeping in with each passing second.

“Tell your dad and Bexley I said hi,” he snarls, flicking his lighter before releasing it. He strolls out, closing the door behind him.

And then, it’s all-consuming red flames.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Trayton

I glare at my phone, checking the time and noticing an hour and a half has passed since I last heard from Daxton. The message I sent ten minutes ago still shows as unread. I slump back on my bed and scroll through the menu of the nearby BBQ joint. I remember Cope telling me he didn't like the fancy place he and Ashton ate at, that apparently, he was feeling out of place there. Tonight, I just want something low-key for the two of us. I tap Daxton's name, and the call rings three times before cutting off abruptly—as if it were forwarded. That's odd. I try again; this time, it goes straight to voicemail. What the hell?

Frustrated, I dial Cope. "Trayton, if you've hurt my roomie, there'll be hell to pay," he barks through the background noise.

"Cope, can you get somewhere quieter?" I shout, pulling the phone away from my ear.

"Just a minute." His voice clashes with the noise, so I wait and glance at my phone again, hoping for a message from Daxton, but there's nothing.

"What's up?" Cope finally asks hesitantly. "Have you seen Dax?" I ask, the tension palpable.

"What? No, he was with you, right?"

"Yes, but he went back to your dorm to change—I'm meant to be taking him out for dinner."

Before I can add more, Cope chimes in with a teasing, "Oh, cute."

I hurry my explanation, the pit in my stomach growing. “He said he’d only be an hour. He’s a half hour late now. I tried calling—three rings and then straight to voicemail.” A sick feeling churns inside me.

“Maybe he just needed some time alone?” Cope suggests, as though that were the obvious answer.

“Cope, he told me he loved me.” Something isn’t right. “I’m heading over to your dorm.” I throw on my sneakers and grab my sweater in a rush.

“Tray,” Cope warns, worry threading through his tone. “He’s been having some trouble lately.”

“What kind of trouble?” I snap as my eyes narrow.

“With his uncle.”

“What? Why am I just hearing about this now?”

I quicken my pace into a run across the campus.

I burst through the front doors and take the stairs two at a time. Cope’s voice crackles on the other end of the phone, mingling with Brayden and Kal’s whispered words. I pound on a dorm door until nothing but oppressive silence meets me. “Cope,” I murmur, barely daring to hope. “He’s not here.”

“Tray.” Brayden’s voice comes over the line, low and hurried.

“Bray, what’s this Marley like?”

“Bad news, Tray—really, really bad.”

The sound of it twists something inside me. Would Daxton have willingly gone with him?

Time seems to stall as I stand rooted on the threshold. “Oh shit.” Instantly, I pull up the tracker app, still listening to Brayden. “I’ve got a tracker on his phone,” I mutter. There’s a sinking feeling in my gut.

A distant shout catches my ear—someone says, “A tracker?” But I’m too focused on the screen. Then I freeze.

Last known location: the trailer park.

Dread floods through me, and my mind races with possibilities—did he choose this, or was he taken against his will? I remember every tremor in his voice over the past few months; after today, after all he admitted, I know he would never willingly go there.

“He’s at the trailer park.”

“We’re coming—stay on campus!” Bray’s command cracks the air. But I cut him off, refusing to be swayed.

“No, meet me at the park,” I insist, already moving.

I fire up the ride-share app, spotting a car just one minute away, and book it immediately. My phone continues to buzz with calls. I know it will be the guys telling me to wait. But what if he's in danger? I won't let this chance slip away—I'm not about to lose him again.

The ride arrives in mere moments. I dive in and nearly yell for the driver to floor it, a plea hidden in my frantic words. Ten minutes later, the car screeches to a stop. Relief mingles with anxiety as I thank fate silently—the driver clearly understood the panic in my tone.

We pull into the front of the trailer park, and suddenly, everything spins. A thick veil of smoke wraps around the area, and I brace myself for what awaits me.

The overwhelming smoke chokes the air as the driver slows, and I bolt out, sprinting with every ounce of energy I have toward Daxton's trailer. My heart is pounding, and my chest tightens with fear as towering black smoke spirals upward, flames greedily devouring the windows. "Daxton!" I shout desperately. Neighbors emerge from their trailers, the distant wail of sirens growing louder. My eyes dart frantically through the gathering crowd, searching for Daxton, but he's nowhere to be seen. With trembling hands, I pull out my phone and dial his number, only to be met with the dreaded voicemail. "No. No. No." Not in there, please. I check the app again—still pinpointed at his trailer.

"Trayton," a voice calls, and I turn with a flicker of hope, only to see the guys rushing toward me, fear etched on their faces. We stand there, helpless, as more flames lash out of the windows, the smoke thickening. A fire engine roars up, and firefighters, police, and paramedics swarm the scene. The sound of shattering glass pierces the air, eliciting screams as a mass of flames bursts from a window.

"Is there anyone in there?" a firefighter shouts to the crowd.

"Why aren't they going inside?" I shout, my voice cutting through the chaos. My heart pounds with urgency as I push through the crowd, all eyes locked on the trailer engulfed in fierce, bright flames. The fire hoses spray endlessly, yet the water seems to vanish against the raging fire. "Someone needs to go in there, please!" I beg, my words getting lost in the sea of panic. Maybe he just left his phone in there. He may not even be in there. He's not. He can't be.

"I need you all to listen," a firefighter shouts to the crowd, getting everyone to quiet down. "Is there anyone in there?"

“I saw a man and Daxton go in, but only the man came out,” someone yells from behind, and my world tilts, the voices around me fading into a blur. Panic surges like a tidal wave, stealing my breath.

“Tray, breathe,” Bray urges, grasping my face. “They’ll get him out. Please, Tray, breathe for me.” Another window explodes, sending firefighters scrambling as they shout for everyone to back away. All the firefighters stand close to us and not the trailer. They unleash a torrent of water through the window, but the fire seems insatiable, flames rising higher and higher.

I watch helplessly as the flames grow bigger, angrier. He’s in there. He’s burning alive in that fire as I stand here watching.

Daxton’s face swarms my brain, images of him taunting me, and it’s as if our life flashes through my brain. Every moment we’ve had together.

“Whatever you want it to mean.”

“You hurt me the most, Tray.”

“Little did he know, I already knew just how amazing you were.”

“Because I wanted to be kissing you,”

“I loved you first.”

“No one could ever be you. It was always you, deep down.”

“The first guy who broke my heart

“And you were the first boy I ever loved.”

“Then you have been in love, Tray. Love always hurts. Believe me, I know.”

I never knew what heartbreak felt like until this moment.

Even when it doesn’t mean to, love can really hurt. I can’t lose him.

I glance at the firefighters and then at the door that none of them are near. I then shift my focus to Bray and Kal, their faces a mirror of fear and helplessness. “I can’t lose him again when I’ve just got him back,” I say. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, barely audible above the shouting. Determination steels my heart as I barge one firefighter out the way and sprint toward the trailer. Behind me, cries erupt, my name mingling with the sounds of terror and urgency. I yank off my sweater as I run, wrapping it around my hand as a makeshift shield, and pull open the scorching metal door. A wave of heat and sharp smoke bursts out, pushing me back a few steps. But I can’t stop. I press my sweater over my mouth, blocking the choking fumes, and step into the searing heat.

The interior of the trailer is a suffocating blaze, alive with the crackling dance of orange flames and the swirling clouds of thick, black smoke. My eyes sting and immediately water from all the smoke as I peer through the dense haze, desperately searching for him. “Daxton?” I call out, my voice hoarse and muffled by the fabric of my sweater pressed against my mouth. A faint whimper reaches my ears, barely audible over the roaring chaos of the fire. I stumble toward the sound, tripping over furniture scattered across the floor. “Daxton,” I call out again. The acrid smoke is choking me as I push my sweater more firmly against my face. In the dim, flickering light at the back corner of the trailer, I spot a slumped figure—Daxton, tied to a chair, his head rolled forward, unmoving. My heart races, pounding in my chest as I lunge toward him. One side of his jumper is burned, his raw, blistered skin showing. The blistering heat behind me sears at my skin. I move myself behind him, and I frantically work to untie the rope, my fingers clumsy and fumbling with urgency. The heat surrounding us gets hotter, and it feels like I’m burning my lungs with each breath I take in. “I’ve got you,” I rasp, pulling him into my arms. One of my arms erupts in pain, but all I can think about or focus on is getting Daxton out of here alive. Dax coughs violently, his small body trembling as he buries his face against my chest. The smoke thickens, a suffocating curtain that blinds and chokes us. A loud crack echoes above, and I look up just in time to see a section of the ceiling crumbling from the flames that are spreading. Pain explodes through me as it hits mine and Daxton’s arm. I scream out in pain, my body slowly closing down on me as the pain begins to blanket the adrenaline. Daxton goes floppy in my arms, and the spike of adrenaline surges through me again, so I push forward two steps, but my legs falter as someone suddenly blocks the doorway and pulls Daxton from my grip. My legs buckle, and I feel myself being caught as I gasp for air, struggling to draw in more than short, desperate breaths. Agony racks my body, but my eyes frantically scan the chaos for Daxton. “Dax.” Hardly any sound comes out. “Dax.” Tears blur my vision as everything around me grows distant. A mask is thrust over my face, but I claw at it, disoriented and frantic to find him. “Dax.” I hear my name, a frantic cry from somewhere, but everything becomes foggy and indistinct. My chest tightens, constricting with fear and smoke, as someone presses the mask firmly over my face. My surroundings blur into a haze. “Dax,” I murmur through the mask.

“I need—” A man leans over me, his voice calm but urgent.

“I need you to stop talking for me. Just focus on taking deep breaths.”

“Tell him,” I croak amid the chaos.

“You can tell him yourself soon. Keep this mask on for me, Trayton, and continue to take deep breaths.” My body shudders violently, each jolt sending a shockwave of agony through my chest as my lungs scream for mercy.

Why is it so hard to breathe?

I turn my head to the left, and that’s when I see Daxton. His body lies limp, completely still, his eyes closed as if in a deep, unreachable sleep. People huddle over him, their faces a blur of concern and urgency. Why are their hands on his chest?

“Daxtonnnn.” I try to scream his name, but it comes out as a strangled cry, tears cascading down my cheeks. I shove the man’s hand away from the mask, ripping it from my face in desperation, trying to sit up, but the searing pain is unbearable.

“Dax.” I choke on my sob with a mixture of terror and sorrow as more people crowd around and block my view of him.

“Keep that on him,” someone commands, and another man firmly replaces the mask over my face. My world blurs again, the edges of my vision swimming as my heart races wildly. I hear my name faintly being screamed by Brayden, I think, but I don’t care about anyone else right now. It’s only him. It’s only ever been him.

What will I do if he doesn’t make it?

Panic sets in like a vice grip, squeezing my chest as a woman speaks to me, her words lost in the noise, leaving me deaf to anything but the roaring in my ears. It’s become impossible to draw in air, every breath a futile struggle.

I can’t get anything in.

And then the lights begin to fade, darkness creeping in from the edges, slowly closing around me like a blanket. My final thought before the darkness consumes me completely is a haunting whisper: What if I never get to tell Daxton that I love him?

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Chapter Forty

Trayton

I blink again, squinting against the harsh fluorescent glare. The sterile white walls and the rhythmic beeping of machines tell me I'm in a hospital. My throat feels raw, like I've swallowed sandpaper, and there's a dull ache in my chest with every breath.

"Trayton?" a soft voice calls from beside me. I turn my head, wincing at the movement, to see Bray sitting in a chair next to the bed. His eyes are red-rimmed, dark circles underneath betraying his exhaustion.

"Dax—" I try to speak, but my voice comes out as a hoarse whisper. Bray quickly reaches for a cup of water on the bedside table, helping me take a small sip. The cool liquid soothes my dry throat.

"Where's Daxton?" I manage to croak out, panic rising in my chest as I struggle to sit up. Bray gently pushes me back down.

"He's alive, Tray. He's in the ICU. The doctors say he inhaled a lot of smoke, and he has some burns, but they're hopeful."

Relief floods through me, but it's quickly followed by a wave of fear. "I need to see him," I insist, trying again to push myself up.

Bray shakes his head. "You can't right now. You've been out for two days, Tray. You inhaled a lot of smoke, too, and you have some pretty bad burns on your arm and back. You've had surgery." I glance down at my arm, which is wrapped in bandages. "The doctors want you to rest."

Two days? The realization hits me like a punch to the gut. I've been unconscious for two whole days while Daxton has been fighting for his life. The thought makes me feel sick.

"I don't care what the doctors say," I rasp, my voice still weak. "I need to see him, Bray. Please."

Bray's face softens with sympathy. "I know you do, Tray. But you're not strong enough yet. Give it a day or two, okay? Focus on getting better so you can be there for him when he needs you."

I want to argue, but exhaustion washes over me in a heavy wave. My eyelids feel like lead weights. "Promise me you'll tell me if anything changes with him," I mumble, already drifting off.

"I promise," Bray says softly. "Now rest."

As I drift in and out of consciousness over the next day, snippets of conversations filter through. Nurses checking my vitals, doctors discussing my condition, Bray and the others taking turns sitting with me. But my mind keeps circling back to one thought: Daxton.

When I finally manage to stay awake for more than a few minutes at a time, I immediately press Bray for more information. "How is he? Has there been any change?"

Bray's expression is guarded. "He's still in critical condition, Tray. The doctors are doing everything they can."

"What aren't you telling me?" I demand.

Bray sighs, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "He hasn't woken up yet. They're worried about potential brain damage from oxygen deprivation."

The words hit me like a physical blow.

The world seems to tilt on its axis as Bray's words sink in. Brain damage. The possibility hangs in the air like a dark cloud, threatening to suffocate me. I struggle to draw in a breath, my chest tight with fear and desperation.

"I need to see him," I insist, my voice cracking. "Now."

Bray hesitates. "Tray, you're still not—"

“I don’t care,” I interrupt, struggling to sit up despite the pain lancing through my body. “I’m going to see him if I have to crawl there myself.”

Bray must see the determination in my eyes because he sighs in resignation. “Let me talk to the nurse.”

An hour later, after much negotiation and a stern lecture from my doctor, I’m being wheeled down the hallway to the ICU. My heart pounds harder with each passing second, anticipation and dread churning in my stomach.

We stop outside a room, and I can see Daxton through the glass. My breath catches in my throat. He looks so small and fragile lying there, surrounded by machines, tubes snaking from his body. His skin is pale, from what I can see, although one whole arm and a part of his face are covered by bandages.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Bray asks gently.

Kal has a firm grip on my shoulder. I later find out that Kal has been pulling strings for me through his dad to get me down here.

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat. Bray wheels me into the room, positioning my chair next to Daxton’s bed. Up close, the damage is even more apparent. His chest rises and falls with mechanical precision, a ventilator breathing for him. The steady beep of the heart monitor is the only sound in the otherwise silent room.

With trembling fingers, I reach out to touch his hand, careful to avoid the IV line. His skin feels cool beneath mine.

“Hey, Dax,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “I’m here. I’m so sorry I couldn’t get to you sooner.”

Tears blur my vision as I gently squeeze his hand. There’s no response, no twitch of his fingers or flutter of his eyelids. Just the steady, artificial rise and fall of his chest and the rhythmic beeping of the machines.

“The doctors say you need to wake up,” I continue. “So you have to fight, okay? You have to come back to me.”

I lean in closer, ignoring the pain that shoots through my body at the movement. “I never got to tell you,” I murmur. “But I love you too, Dax. I love you so much that it scares me sometimes. So please, please wake up. I need you.”

The silence that follows is deafening. I hold my breath, desperately hoping for some sign that he heard me, that he’s fighting his way back. But there’s nothing—just the steady beep of the heart monitor and the whoosh of the ventilator.

“Talk to him more,” Kal encourages softly from behind me. “They say coma patients can sometimes hear…”

I nod, swallowing hard against the lump in my throat. “Remember when we first met?” I begin, my voice wavering. “You were so quiet, so closed off. But I saw something in you, even then. A light that you tried to hide.”

My thumb traces gentle circles on the back of Daxton’s hand as I speak. “I remember how your eyes would light up when you were tattooing me.” I’m thick with emotion. “How you’d get lost in patterns, this little crease forming between your eyebrows as you concentrated.” I pause, taking a shaky breath. “I never told you, but I used to watch you sometimes when you were drawing. The way your hands moved across the paper, bringing beauty to life… it was like magic, Dax. You’re magic. I fell in love with the way you saw the world.” Tears start to fall, and I don’t bother wiping them away. “I need you to wake up, okay? I need to see those eyes again, to hear your voice. There’s so much I want to tell you, so much we haven’t done yet.”

I lean closer, my lips near his ear. “I love you, Daxton. Please come back to me.”

The steady beep of the heart monitor fills the silence that follows. I hold my breath, desperately searching for any sign of response—a squeeze of his palm, a flutter of his lashes. But there’s nothing. Exhaustion and pain wash over me in waves. I slump forward, resting my forehead against the edge of Daxton’s bed. Tears fall freely now, soaking into the crisp white hospital sheets.

“I can’t lose you. Not when I’ve just found you again.” I’m broken.

A gentle hand on my shoulder startles me. I look up to see a nurse standing there, sympathy etched on her face.

“I’m sorry, but visiting hours are over,” she says softly.

I look up at the nurse, desperation clawing at my throat. “Please, just a few more minutes.” Her eyes soften with compassion.

“All right,” she concedes gently. “Five more minutes.”

As she leaves, I turn back to Daxton, clinging to his hand like a lifeline. “Did you hear that, Dax? We don’t have much time. You need to wake up now, okay?” My voice cracks. “Please, just open your eyes.”

“You should get some rest,” Kal says. He looks so helpless. I reluctantly nod and give up my place beside Daxton’s bed.

“I’ll watch over him, Tray.”

“Do you promise, Kal?”

“I promise you.”

“Thank you.” I know he can’t be here out of visiting hours, but something tells me Kal will make sure he can be here at all hours. Nothing is ever too much when it comes to me and Bray. Kal will crawl each inch of this earth to make sure we’re both okay. That’s just what kind of person he is. He would do just about anything for the people he loves.

“I love you, brother,” he says, closing his eyes and gently kissing my forehead.

Bray wheels me back to my room, the burden of uncertainty feeling as heavy as a lead blanket. As I settle against the pillows, I can’t shake the dark thoughts that invade my mind. What if he doesn’t wake up? What if he does and he’s not the same? The guilt threatens to overwhelm me. If only I’d gotten there sooner…

The days merge into a blur of pain medication and restless sleep. Bray and Kal take turns staying by my side and Daxton’s, keeping me company during visiting hours and filling in the gaps when I’m asleep. Cope sometimes sits with me but spends more time with Daxton, which I prefer. I don’t want him to be alone.

They needed to examine my arm, so they removed the bandages. The pain was excruciating, and when I looked at my scarred skin, I felt nauseous. But I keep reminding myself that it could be worse.

On the fifth day, I’m finally allowed to move around on my own, though the pain in my arm and back still throbs with each movement. I spend every moment I can by Daxton’s side, talking to him, reading to him, pleading with him to wake up. The doctors’ updates are a mix of cautious optimism and guarded concern. His vitals are stable, but there’s still no sign of him regaining consciousness.

I insist on visiting Daxton every day, even when the doctors advise against it. I can’t bear the thought of him waking up alone, confused, and scared. So I sit by his bedside, talking to him, reading to him, playing his favorite music. Anything to let him know I’m here, waiting for him to come back to me.

On the fifth day, as I’m holding his hand and describing a tattoo design I think he’d like, I feel a slight twitch against my palm. My breath catches in my throat as I stare intently at Daxton’s hand, hardly daring to believe it.

“Dax?” I whisper, my voice trembling with hope. “Can you hear me?”

For a long moment, there's nothing. Then, so faint I almost miss it, his fingers curl weakly around mine.

My heart leaps into my throat. "Daxton!" I cry out, louder this time. "Squeeze my hand if you can hear me."

Another squeeze, slightly stronger this time. Tears of relief and joy stream down my face as I frantically press the call button for the nurse.

"He's responding!" I tell her breathlessly when she rushes in. "He squeezed my hand!"

The next few minutes are a whirlwind of activity as doctors and nurses flood the room, checking Daxton's vitals and running tests. I'm gently but firmly pushed aside, my hand reluctantly leaving Daxton's as the medical team works.

"Mr. King, we need you to step out for a moment," a nurse says kindly but leaving no room for argument.

"But I—" I start to protest, my eyes never leaving Daxton's still form.

"We'll update you as soon as we can," she assures me, already guiding me to the door.

I find myself in the hallway, my heart pounding with a mixture of hope and fear. Bray, Kal, and Cope appear moments later.

"What's happening?" Cope asks, his eyes wide with concern.

"He squeezed my hand. He responded to me."

Bray and Kal exchange a look of hope. "That's great news, Tray," Kal says, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

We wait in tense silence, minutes stretching into hours. Doctors come out and go back in. Not giving us any information. Finally, the door opens, and a doctor emerges, looking straight at me.

"Mr. King," he says, addressing me. "Daxton is showing signs of regaining consciousness. This is a positive development, but I want to caution you that the process can be slow and unpredictable."

"Can I see him?" I ask immediately.

The doctor nods. "Briefly. He's still very weak and may drift in and out. We have removed the tubes for now to see how he gets on with his breathing. Try not to overwhelm him."

I nod vigorously, already moving toward the door.

As I step back into Daxton's room, my heart races with anticipation. The machines still beep steadily, but there's a palpable change in the air—a sense of awakening.

I approach the bed slowly, almost afraid to believe what I'm seeing. Daxton's eyes are still closed, but there's a flicker of movement beneath his eyelids. His chest rises and falls with slightly more irregular breaths.

"Dax?" I whisper, gently taking his hand in mine. "Can you hear me?"

For a moment, there's nothing. Then, ever so slowly, his eyelids begin to flutter. My breath catches in my throat as I watch, hardly daring to move.

Finally, his eyes open—just a sliver at first, then blinking sluggishly as they adjust to the light.

They're unfocused, clouded with confusion, but they're open. Those beautiful eyes I've been desperate to see again.

"Dax." I breathe, squeezing his hand gently. "It's me. It's Trayton."

His gaze drifts toward me, struggling to focus. A small crease forms between his brows as he tries to process what he's seeing. I wait, barely breathing. He frowns more, and the sinking feeling slowly pulls me under. I wait with bated breath.

Please know who I am, please.

And then he smiles. *One*. My whole list for today is complete.

"Tray."

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Chapter Forty-One

Daxton

Three months later

As the judge's gavel strikes, finalizing Marley's fate, life with no parole, a collective exhale ripples through our group. It's over, but the weight of what's happened still presses down on us all.

Bray's grip on my hand tightens, and I turn to see tears streaming down his face. Without a word, I pull him into a hug, feeling his body shake with silent sobs. Over his shoulder, I catch Bohdi's eye on the other side of him. He nods, understanding passing between us. We've all lost so much, but we've gained each other.

As we file out of the courtroom, I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's Cope, his usually stoic face etched with concern. "You okay?" he asks, his gruff voice softening.

I nod, managing a small smile. "I will be," I reply. "I think I'm just processing it all." I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of the moment. "It's strange, you know? Part of me feels relieved, but another part…"

"Feels conflicted," Kal finishes for me gently. I nod, grateful for his understanding.

As we leave the courtroom, the noise of the world rushes back in. Reporters request statements, their cameras flashing. Tray and Cope form a protective barrier around me, shielding me from the onslaught of questions.

Outside, the crisp air fills my lungs. I pause on the courthouse steps, looking out at the city sprawled before us. It's the same place I've always

known, yet everything feels different now. The familiar streets and buildings hold new meaning, each corner a reminder of how much has changed.

“You want to grab some food?” Bray asks, pulling me from my thoughts. “I could use a burger right about now.”

The idea of normalcy, of sitting in a diner with my friends after everything we’ve been through, is both comforting and surreal. I nod, managing a small smile. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

As we walk to Cope’s truck, I feel Tray’s hand slip into mine. He doesn’t say anything, but his presence is a steady comfort. The others fall into step around us, their chatter a soothing background noise. I turn around, looking at everyone.

“No Bohdi?” I question Tray. Tray shakes his head.

“He wanted to give Bray some time with us.” I nod in understanding.

At the diner, we squeeze into a large booth. The vinyl seats squeak as we settle in, and the smell of coffee and grilled onions fills the air. For a moment, it almost feels like any other day—like we’re just a group of friends hanging out after school. But the weight of everything that’s happened hangs over us, an invisible cloud at our table.

Kal slides in next to me, his tall frame almost filling the entire length of the booth. His presence is reassuring as he leans in. “You know,” he murmurs, “it’s okay if you’re not okay. We’re all here for you.” His sincerity wraps around me like a warm blanket.

I manage a small smile, looking up at his kind eyes. My head bobs in acknowledgment. “I know. It’s just… I can’t stop thinking about my dad. And Marley.” My gaze drifts across the table to meet Brayden’s eyes, which mirror my sadness. “About Bex.” I feel a tear escape and trail down my cheek. “How different things could have been if…” My voice trails off, but my unspoken words hang heavy in the air.

Under the table, Tray’s hand finds mine, his thumb moving in slow, soothing circles over my palm. It’s a small gesture, but it anchors me. Brayden breaks the silence, his voice unexpectedly firm. “We shouldn’t be here,” he states, and I release a breath of relief, hoping he’s about to echo what I’ve been wanting to do since we left the courthouse.

The cemetery is quiet, save for the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze. We stand in a semicircle around Bex’s grave, the fresh flowers and trinkets left by previous visitors still here. It seems that Bohdi frequently visits this

place due to his own guilt. Guilt has a way of gnawing at people, and according to Brayden's recent comments, it's prodded at Bohdi quite a bit. He felt there was more he could have done, which seems absurd because he was incredible. After the fire, many things came to light, especially when Brayden saw his mom for the first time that day. Bohdi had been visiting her, providing meals, and cleaning up after her. He felt he owed it to Bex. Bohdi wanted to help Bexley, wanted to save him just as much as we all did. But after hearing last year from Bexley what went down between him and Bohdi, I don't think Bohdi ever truly forgave himself and hates the fact he never got the chance to help Bex. Because he would have. He's a good person like that. Initially, Brayden didn't take it well, annoyed by the fact that Bohdi was doing it behind his back. Yet, over time, he seemed to come around, understanding that Bohdi's actions were for Bex's sake. There's a lot of wrong she has done, yet she's tangled up in this mess, just like Bex was.

She's an addict, just as Bex had been.

Brayden kneels, carefully placing the peanut butter cup on the headstone. His fingers linger on the cold marble, tracing the etched letters of his brother's name. "We did it, Bex," he says softly, thick with emotion. "We got justice for you."

I feel Tray's arm tighten around my waist, supporting me as I step forward. My hand shakes slightly as I lay a single white rose next to the candy. "I wish you were here," I whisper, my words carried away by the wind. "You'd know exactly what to say to make sense of all this." A comfortable silence settles over our group as we stand there, lost in our own thoughts and memories of Bex. The winter breeze rustles the nearby trees, scattering golden leaves across the graveyard. It feels peaceful here, a stark contrast to the turmoil of the past months.

Cope clears his throat, breaking the silence. "Bex would be proud of all of you. The way you've stuck together, looked out for each other. That's what he always wanted."

Kal nods in agreement. "He brought us together, and now we're family. That's his legacy."

I feel tears prick at my eyes again, but this time they're not entirely from sadness. There's gratitude there, too, and a bittersweet joy. Bray reaches out an arm, pulling me into a side hug. I lean into him, drawing comfort from his familiar presence.

“You know,” Bray says softly. “Bex always said you were the strongest person he knew. Even when you didn’t believe it yourself.”

I swallow hard, remembering all the times Bex had encouraged me, pushed me to see my own worth. “He saw the best in everyone,” I murmur.

“Especially you,” Tray adds gently. We stand there for a while longer, sharing stories and memories of Bex. Laughter mingles with tears as we remember his jokes, his kindness, the way he could light up a room just by walking in. It feels good to talk about him like this, to celebrate his life rather than mourn his loss. As the sun begins to dip lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the graveyard, I feel a sense of peace settling over me.

“We should probably head back,” Cope says eventually, glancing at his watch. “It’s getting late.”

There’s a moment of hesitation, none of us wanting to leave just yet. But slowly, we begin to gather ourselves, preparing to go. As the others start walking in the direction of the trucks, I linger for a moment longer.

“I’ll catch up,” I tell Tray, who nods his understanding and gives my hand a squeeze before following the others.

Alone now, I crouch down by Bex’s headstone. My fingers trace the cool marble, feeling the indentations of his name. “I miss you,” I whisper. “But I promise I’ll keep living, keep fighting. For you, for all of us.” I stand up slowly, taking a deep breath. The setting sun paints the sky in vibrant oranges and pinks, a beautiful backdrop to this bittersweet moment. As I turn to leave, a gentle breeze rustles through the nearby trees, and for a fleeting second, I could swear I hear Bex’s laughter carried on the wind.

Maybe he’s celebrating up there.

Walking back to the group, I feel a strange mix of sadness and hope. Tray meets me halfway, wordlessly taking my hand in his. His warmth grounds me, reminding me that I’m not alone in this. These last three months have been strange between us. We’ve all been through so much over the past two years, and we’re each dealing with it in our own way. But Tray hasn’t told me he loves me once since I woke up, even though Cope said he told me many times while I was in the coma. I’m trying not to let it bother me, but I can’t stop wondering if something has changed for him and if heartbreak is coming.

I’ve gotten close to Brayden recently, and he tells me Tray struggles with his feelings and that I just need to be patient. So I try to be. I’m just going

to enjoy the days Tray wants me and hope there's never a day when he doesn't.

As we pile into Cope's truck, the conversation shifts to lighter topics. Kal and Bray start debating the merits of various pizza toppings, their playful bickering a welcome distraction. I lean my head against Tray's shoulder, letting the familiar voices of my friends wash over me.

This is where I belong.

This is family.

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Chapter Forty-Two

Trayton

Two months later

"All right, gather 'round! Before we hit the ice, I need a quick word with you all," Coach booms. I toss my phone aside and stride over to join my teammates in the huddle. "This year? It's been incredible. I've watched you guys grow and grow; you got better with each training session, each game. You're warriors. And believe me, you've made me proud, even if some of you push my patience to the limit." Coach levels me with a pointed look like this is new news. "Yes, that's directed at you," Coach says. I grin, because Coach picking on me is his own love language, and well, I love the attention. Meanwhile, Kal—our ever-serious captain—stands opposite me, rolling his eyes like it shouldn't be something to be proud of. It's always been known that I raise Coach's blood pressure and make him wish he took another job doing accounts or something, but I wear that badge with fucking honor. "When you step onto that ice, remember who you are. Remember the blood, sweat, and tears that brought us here. We play for each other, for the Devil Hawks who came before us, and for the fans who believe in us. We have a target on our backs, and that's exactly where we want it. Because we don't shy away from challenges—we embrace them. We fight harder, skate faster, and play smarter. We are relentless, we are fearless, and we are unstoppable. Look into each other's eyes and know that you are not alone. We are a united force, and we will leave everything on that ice to defend our title. No regrets, no second

chances. This is our house, our game, our legacy. Devil Hawks on three. One, two, three—DEVIL HAWKS!" Kal and Bray both pull me into a tight hug, our arms wrapping around each other as if we're forming a shield against the world. After a moment, we step back and head to our lockers, each retreating into our own thoughts. I reach into my locker and retrieve the coin that has been with me since the beginning. It's worn and smooth from countless touches, and I can't help but smile as I rub its surface. The familiar words etched into the metal catch my eye: Fuck Yes and Fuck No. This coin has been my guide, my decision-maker, before every game. I rely on it to bring me the luck I need. Today, though, my mind drifts away from the usual game-related questions. Instead, I find myself whispering, "Does everyone in life always leave?" My fingers trace the Fuck No, and a sense of reassurance washes over me. Then another question bubbles to the surface: "Have I fallen in love with Daxton Rivers?" I can't suppress the grin that spreads across my face as I rub the Fuck Yes. I stare at those words for a moment. "I best tell him then," I decide, placing the coin back into my locker and slamming it shut with a sense of finality. "Boys, we're going to fuck them up the ass so hard, shit will be pouring out of their mouths," I shout with a bold confidence. Cheers erupt around me, mingled with a few groans, Kal being one of them.

"King, you're fucking disgusting, but yes, fuck their shit." Coach pumps his fist in the air with intensity, and Kal groans louder, his face contorting in exaggerated disgust.

"My dick ain't going near any ass or shit, but yes, we will fuck them." He stresses the word "them" with a pointed look up. Our team erupts in cheers, the locker room buzzing with adrenaline and anticipation, everyone brimming with confidence, ready to take down the Boston Bears.

As we make our way through the dimly lit tunnel leading to the rink, Cope jogs up beside me, his breath visible in the cold air. "Nervous?" he asks over the echo of our footsteps.

"Pft, like fuck," I reply with a smirk, trying to mask the jittery energy coursing through me. "We're killing them."

"I'm not talking about the game, Tray," he softly murmurs. The realization hits me—he's referring to my little surprise planned for after the game.

"Absolutely dreading it," I admit, giving him a tight-lipped smile that gives away my nerves. It's true. I've never opened up to anyone like this

before, especially not the way I'm doing it. Daxton laid his soul bare before me, sharing everything, even secrets he swore to keep from others, all because he loves me and wants me to truly know him. He was on life support. He nearly died. We both did. I told him I loved him all the time he was in that coma. And I meant every single word.

But nearly losing him did something to my brain chemistry. It's taken me so long to really believe he's here and that he's not leaving me again.

I've been so tied up on people always leaving that I was too scared to utter those three words to Daxton's face in case he fell through my grasp. I've fallen so deeply for him. I fell a long, long time ago, but I was too stubborn to acknowledge it, too skeptical to believe in love. But he changed that. Daxton made me see that while people might leave, sometimes there's a reason that brings them back. He returned to me, and I genuinely believe his soul was meant to find mine. I've never believed in soul mates, but with Daxton, there's a certainty I can't deny. I fucking know it.

"He's going to love it, Tray. You did good," Cope assures me with an encouraging smile.

"Let's hope so." The words have barely left my lips as we step out of the tunnel. The blinding stadium lights hit me, and the roar of the crowd washes over us, a tidal wave of sound that fuels every part of me. The moment my skates touch the ice, everything around me fades into a muted hum. Time seems to slow as I draw in deep breaths of the frigid air, allowing it to fill my lungs and consume me whole.

Our rink is our sanctuary tonight—a place where every moment feels like a hard-won victory. I trace smooth, deliberate circles on the ice, the cool air stinging my cheeks as I ease my muscles into motion. Suddenly, the opening beats of "We Will Rock You" surge through the speakers—a song that we've embraced as our lucky charm ever since last year. Although Brayden and Bexley originally claimed it as theirs, Bray insists that the music makes him feel as though Bexley is standing right here on the rink, silently cheering him on. All around, people join in the chorus, their feet stamping and their bodies swaying as the booming drums ignite the atmosphere. I glance over at Brayden, who is now twirling in a tight circle, his eyes scanning the crowd before he returns the energy, singing his heart out. Then, with a sudden focus, he stops, fixed on one point. There, among the swirling activity, stands Bohdi. The moment his gaze meets Brayden's, Bohdi's smile—warm, genuine, and framed by his Number 13's Biggest

Fan hat, lights up the whole rink. In that glance, their expressions soften, communicating an unspoken, intense connection that makes it seem as if the entire world has shrunk to just the two of them. As I watch them, my heart tightens with longing. In that split second, all I can think about is Daxton. Earlier, he told me he couldn't join us in the locker room—despite Coach's assurance that he was as much a part of our team as anyone, but apparently, he needed to sort his art project out before the game.

And then, almost like magic, I see him standing beside Bohdi. My Dax. His smile shimmers with a cascade of bright, full teeth, and in that instant, my heart pounds as if trying to burst free and sprint over to him. All I want is to be in his arms—to kiss him, to feel his hold. With a playful gesture, Dax points at his top. "Are Boston Bears going to win? Fuck No." I can't help but burst into laughter. And then I read the next line: "Is Trayton King hot as fuck? Fuck Yes." I grin back at him through my helmet, silently grateful that he can't see the full extent of how much I'm blushing right now because he would never let this go if he did. I can't lie: Seeing him wear a shirt with my name displayed on it stirs something intensely magnetic within me, and the heat creeping up my neck has little to do with my blush. There's an undeniable pull—I crave him in ways that go far beyond words. I find myself staring into his eyes, hoping my gaze conveys every whispered thought swirling inside me. And sure enough, his cheeks instantly redden, and he quickly glances over at Bohdi, as if checking that no one else sees his flaming cheeks that I have come to love so much. I love it when he looks that way—nervous, shy, and completely mine. I hear the sharp, piercing sound of a referee's whistle echoing through the arena, and then Brayden's grin vanishes in an instant, replaced by a look of steely determination. "Here's Quake," I mutter under my breath as Brayden strides past me, his focus unwavering, eyes locked on the opposing player he's about to face off against. Brayden has a knack for getting under the skin of his opponents, a talent for saying exactly what will unsettle them, which almost always gives him the edge in winning the puck. He's incredible, a real force on the ice. Kal and I stand at the rink with Brayden, ready for the play we've rehearsed a thousand times. As soon as the puck drops, Brayden scoops it up with his signature flawless motion and charges down the ice. I speed up his left side; when he slides the puck to me, I send it back in our practiced rhythm. The black puck zips across the white surface as Brayden

maneuvers through the opposing defense, and the crowd's roar swells as I dart between defenders, my heart pounding with every stride.

Brayden's brief glance gives me the signal—I break away toward the goal. The perfect pass lands on my stick; time seems to slow as I wind up and unleash the strongest slap shot of my life. The buzzer sounds, and I score. I immediately skate over to Daxton, pointing and mouthing, "That one was for you."

The game remains in our favor—Kal nets the next goal—while the opposition manages only one through Cope. After Cope squares up to a teammate and earns a penalty, our defense crumbles, and we concede a few more goals. I catch a glimpse of Cope, furious and screaming, as he returns to the ice. Coach calls a line change, and Brayden, Kal, and I leave the ice, though I know Coach wants us back for crunch time. Our focus is relentless despite the scouts' presence and my lingering thoughts about Daxton, who turned my dream of going pro upside down.

On the bench, we remain silent and game-focused, determined to avoid overtime. But when Coach calls another shift, we're back on the ice as overtime is announced. The arena is deafening with anxious cheers while Brayden wins the face-off cleanly, setting off a fast-paced scramble that finds me weaving through defenders. Brayden murmurs, "Come on, Tray, let's do this." I fake a shot to drop their goalie, pass to Brayden at the crease, and watch as his shot is saved. The puck bounces off the boards; Kal retrieves it and passes to Cope at the blue line, who fires a slap shot that gets blocked.

The rebound finds me, and I quickly control the puck, noticing Brayden cutting close to the net. I deliver a perfect pass; Brayden tips the puck on goal, only for the goalie to deflect it again. As the opposition sweeps in for a counterattack, I dig deep, sprint hard, and block their shot. I recover the puck, turn, shake off a defender, and set it back to Kal at the point. Kal fakes a shot to draw defenders, then dishes it back to me. Seeing my chance, I fire a powerful slap shot that slices past the goalie and thuds into the net.

The arena erupts as the red goal light flashes; our bench explodes with celebration. Teammates pile on in a jubilant heap, Coach breaks into a rare smile, and the fans chant "Devil Hawks!" Kal skates over, pulling Brayden and me into a tight hug as we share the triumph in those precious final moments. "We did it, boys. We fucking did it." We're all grins as we all pull

on each other, and then among all the celebrations, I hear his voice through the speakers.

I hear Daxton.

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Chapter Forty-Three

Trayton

"Devil Hawks isn't just any old ice hockey team."

My eyes drift up to the arena screens, which are alive with sketch after sketch of our team—some capturing us in the heat of action, others in the locker room, where we're relaxed and happy.

"They're a family, a brotherhood, a bond held so tight together no one could ever break it," Daxton's voice says over the pictures. A drawing of the three pucks in chains, the one Daxton designed for my tattoo, flashes on the screen, and I can't help but grin widely. Kal and Bray stand beside me, each placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "They test each other; they go against each other in training." Now a video plays, showing us as fierce rivals on the ice. "But they always come back together." The screen shifts to us laughing together, the friendship clear as our training session wraps up.

"They protect, they fight—this time a clip of Cope appears, seated in the locker room where we all give our interviews. "Who winds you up the most, Cope?" Daxton asks. "Definitely Tray," Cope replies without missing a beat, prompting laughter from us and the crowd. At that moment, I almost forget everyone is watching. "But I wouldn't have him any other way."

"Awww," echoes warmly throughout the rink. "Well, okay, maybe I'd change a little bit," Cope adds with a cheeky grin. I turn to Cope and playfully flip him off. Daxton's voice smoothly narrates over the video as Bray's face fills the screen.

“They love.”

Bray looks over at Dax, his wide, toothy grin lighting up the screen and warming my heart. “What does hockey mean to you, Brayden?” he asks. Brayden’s smile softens, as if he’s drifting into a sea of memories. “It means hoping it could change my life and my brother’s,” he begins. “It’s those Saturday mornings at the rink, meeting people who turn into your forever friends, into family. It’s shaking the vending machine until all the candy tumbles out after practice. It’s tears when your team loses. It’s punches, black eyes, and split lips. It’s blood, and lots of it.” He chuckles, and we all join in, knowing it’s all so true. “It’s hope and dreams. It’s the chill in the air. It’s the place where you battle your demons. It’s Tray, Kal, Cope, Jennings, Becketts, Jacobs, Masons, Smithson, Coach, Number 13’s Biggest Fan, and it’s you.” Brayden beams at Daxton. “It’s an unbreakable bond. It’s brotherhood. It’s family.”

I clench my jaw, trying to keep my emotions in check, but that speech really hit home. I sniffle, and Brayden turns his head toward me, laughing. “Oh my god.”

“Say one word,” I warn, trying to sound tough. “And I’ll tell everyone how you got off just from eating Bohdi’s ass.”

“You really are an A-class bitch, you know that.”

“Queen bitch to you.” We both burst into laughter, turning our eyes back to the screen as the arena seems to freeze, captivated by Daxton’s work. It’s flawless, the way he’s captured the essence of everything. He definitely deserves top grades for this.

Kal’s face fills the screen, and he glares at the camera as if it has personally offended him.

“Kal, where do you see yourself in five years?”

Kal shifts in his seat, looking uncomfortable for the first time. “Erm, signed with the NHL, living out my hockey dream.” His answer is blunt, pure Kal.

“What about outside of hockey?”

Suddenly, Kal’s face lights up for a moment, then dims slightly. “A beautiful fiancée on one arm while I hold my baby in my other,” he says, genuinely smiling as if he’s watching it unfold. “A nice house, somewhere quiet, with a front porch and lots of land. Maybe a dog.” He shifts in his seat again and looks at Dax. “I see myself being happy, watching the halftime show with all my boys, but most importantly, I see Bray and Tray

on either side of me, having succeeded in every sweet way possible. I know that as long as they're by my side in five years, my life will be complete."

Brayden chokes on a sob, and I rub his back gently. "Little bitch," I whisper, feeling my own bottom lip tremble.

And then my face shows.

"Here we go," Kal mumbles behind me.

I remember this day. It wasn't long after I sucked his dick in the library and demanded that he meet me in the locker room for the interview. I remember looking at him at this very moment, wishing I could grab him right there and fuck him. But I couldn't because I "hated him." What a load of horse shit.

"What are you thinking right now?" he asks. I knew he saw it in my eyes. He saw the heat because it was mirrored back.

I rub my thumb against my lip, remembering the way I collected the dripping cum from my lips and pushed it into his mouth, hooking his teeth to pull him closer. I was teetering on the edge of storming over to him and fucking him so goddamn hard. "Next question."

"What do you love about Devil Hawks?"

"Why don't you ask me something you really want to know? Not for the camera. For you."

The loud sigh comes through the speakers from Daxton.

"Do you believe in love?" My eyes flash on the camera in complete shock. I remember I was expecting him to ask me why I was such a prick or something along those lines, but not that.

"No," I say. "What does love mean to you?"

"I'm leading the interview."

"And I'm asking you a simple question."

There's silence for a minute. And then Dax speaks. "Love is many different things. Love could mean one thing to you and a thousand things to me."

"What does love mean to you?" I repeat.

"To me, love is the person I'd run to if I knew we had only one more day on Earth. It's the person I'd want to lie with when everything crumbles around us—no fear, no tears, just us because that's what it would be. Being content with them on my last day in this world."

We sit there in silence. Staring at each other, and then I say, "If I ever figure out what it means for me, I'll let you know. But don't hold your

breath.” I then wink at the camera. “Over and out,” I say before it cuts off.

Suddenly, a shower of Polaroid pictures cascades from the ceiling. “What the hell,” I mutter as they land softly on the ice and among the fans. Everyone’s eyes widen in amazement as the photos gently drift down. I crouch to pick one up and burst into laughter—it’s Becketts flipping off the coach when his back is turned. I tuck it into my pocket, planning to tease Becks with it later.

“Oh my god.” Brayden laughs loudly, flashing the picture he snagged. It’s Cope, naked in the locker room, arms out wide, facing the camera, but Daxton has his hand in front of the camera, hiding his dick. Our laughter echoes around us as we gather more photos. Some capture us goofing around, while others are more serious. Kal is rarely smiling, which is not a surprise.

These pictures show us in our truest form, unguarded and real, beyond the seriousness of the game. They reveal the deep bond we share as a family.

Then banners unfurl from the high arena ceilings, revealing huge watercolor paintings. One features our logo, another an incredible portrait of our coach. There’s a stunning watercolor of all of us on the ice, smiling, with Daxton crouched down in the middle beside someone else.

Another Brayden? No, it’s Bex, with a halo and white wings, smiling brightly at the camera, cheeks full, like the way he used to look, holding a peanut butter cup. Brayden breaks down in sobs beside me, and Kal and I hold him tight.

“It’s perfect,” he manages to say through his tears.

Another drops: it’s one of me, Bray, and Kal, all with our arms around each other’s shoulders smiling, and then there’s a picture of Dax, frowning at me as I frown back at him, and then written under it “The Scum to my Sewer.”

When we hated each other.

I spin on my skates to find Daxton, who is beaming up at the banners. I can’t believe he pulled this off. It’s absolutely incredible. Gasps surround the arena, voices picking up as people look at all the Polaroid pictures and laugh. I dread to think what other ones are floating around here. And then the screen flickers again, and I take a deep breath.

I grin and glance at Daxton, who’s sitting there with a flushed face, probably embarrassed from all the attention. His brows are knitted together

as he stares at the screen, like he's desperately trying to remember if he's seen this before.

He hasn't. This is new for him. I turn to Cope, who beams at me, and we both focus on the screen.

"I think you have to press that button at the top," my voice crackles through the speaker as the camera wobbles a bit.

"How the heck do you work this thing?" Cope groans, and the camera flips upside down while I sit there. "The top button, hit that." Laughs filter from the surrounding fans.

"It's already pressed," he replies and then steadies the camera. "Oh shoot, it's recording."

I frantically gesture to stop, slicing my hand across my throat, yelling cut.

Cope steadies the camera, and I shoot him a look through the lens, wondering why he didn't stop recording.

I glance over at Cope as he wipes away tears of laughter, and then my eyes shift to Daxton, who's looking up at the screen with the most dazzling smile. That's when I know I made the right decision.

"I'm not a fucking director, Trayton, you can't cut," he says, and I frown at him.

"Surely we can cut this bit, right?" I ask.

"Just say what you gotta say, Trayton." Cope sighs. I give him a lingering frown, then turn to the camera. My shoulders drop, and I smile, imagining Daxton sitting right in front of me.

That's what I pictured.

"Hi, Dax," I say. "So, I kinda hijacked your project, and I'm sorry, but my interview was a mess. That was on me. So I thought I'd continue it." I pause, wiping my palms on my jeans because, for some reason, I felt nervous.

I don't get nervous. Ever.

"Daxton Rivers," I say, my smile brightening with his name.

"I once asked you what love meant to you, and you said love can mean so many different things. It might be one thing for you and a thousand things for me. You then turned the question on me, and I replied that I'd let you know once I figured it out. But don't hold your breath." I pause, drawing a deep breath.

"Well, I've figured it out." I gaze into the camera, imagining it's Daxton's eyes.

“It wasn’t hard to discover, and I think I’ve known the answer since I was eleven.” I smile warmly. “You see, I met this boy on the top of a lighthouse when I was going through a really tough time in life. And so was he. We became each other’s light in the nights we sat up there, looking at the stars. My Quiet Boy didn’t have to say many words. His presence was louder than anyone had ever been in my life. I fell so hard for him. It was like he was my air, and I couldn’t live without him. I don’t think I ever stopped falling, and I don’t think I ever stopped chasing that air I needed so desperately.” I smile at the camera. “I can breathe freely now.” I take a deep breath. “Dax, you said love for you is that person you’d run to if you had only one day left on this earth. I’d like to think you’d come over if it’s our last night. I’d hold you. I’d hold you to the end of time.” My lip trembles as I struggle to hold my emotions in check. I rub my hands down my jeans again as I look down, and then my eyes meet the camera. More determined than ever. “Love might mean many things to others, but for me, love means one thing.” I pause, my smile fading as tears well up in my eyes. I never thought I’d feel love again or believe in it, but he made it possible. I glance at Daxton, already looking at me, his eyes glistening. As I speak those words on the video, I mouth them to him as well.

“It’s you.”

A tear slips from his eye and cascades down his cheek, soon followed by another. But he’s not sad. A warm smile spreads across his face, his eyes crinkling with joy. Mine remain fixed on him as my voice rings out from the screen.

“Can you come and tick number two of my list now, please? One is already done. I’ve already made you smile, now I need to tell you those three words to your face. Get off your ass and over those boards, and slide to me on the ice because I’m not telling you on a screen.” As the video fades, Dax jumps over the boards, his steps wobbly. Cope skates to him, holding his arm as if he might break. I roll my eyes as Daxton brushes Cope’s arm away. Dax skids to a stop right in front of me, gripping my arms with determination. I don’t steady him because he’s not fragile.

He’s Daxton. He’s mine.

“Say it,” he demands, his smile growing wider by the second. “Say it, Trayton.” He grins.

“Dax, I love you. I love you so fucking mu—” Before I can finish, Dax’s lips crash onto mine, his tongue exploring my mouth.

“I want to swallow those words and keep them inside me forever.” He breathes against my lips, holding my arms even tighter. Cheers erupt around us, our teammates surrounding us, and someone lifts Dax up, passing him around like a trophy because he is.

He’s my trophy. My life. My soulmate.

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Epilogue

Daxton

I gaze up at the night sky, stars twinkling like diamonds. It was ten years ago today that I first met Trayton. A whole decade since I heard the door creak open behind me and saw a boy with the saddest eyes I'd ever encountered, staring at me wide-eyed. Ten years ago, when he asked if he could join me and I simply nodded.

Ten years since I fell in love with that smile he flashed as he sat down. A smile brighter than any star up there, more luminous than any light around.

He doesn't realize it, but that night, he became my lighthouse. The beatings, the shouting, the way my dad and uncle forced me into their world of selling drugs—none of it mattered that night because of him.

I never told him, but that night, thoughts of how much it would hurt if I jumped couldn't leave my mind. I was up here for that reason alone, yet fear held me back.

At eleven, I was already so weary of life.

He saved me in more ways than he could ever know that night. Because for the first time, hope stared back at me.

I sit with my hood up, knees drawn to my chest, looking at the trees and the shimmering water ahead.

I release a deep sigh and laugh. How did I get this lucky? I used to gaze at those trees, the water, and the lighthouse's glow. It always reminded me of him. His eyes.

My Mystic Tealglow.

Whenever I sketched, I used those colors, and no matter how much I hated it, everything led back to him.

Hating him became easy because loving him felt impossible. Loving him was so hard.

But now, it’s as natural as breathing. He is the air I breathe.

It’s easy.

And loving him has never felt so right. The door creaks open behind me, and a smile sneaks onto my face as I settle into the same spot he found me in a decade ago. Draped in a black hoodie, hood up, I gaze at the stars above.

I peek over my shoulder, my face mostly hidden by the hood, just like always. I became a master at hiding, maybe too good at it.

“Can I sit with you?” he asks softly.

He remembers. He knows what today means. I grin and nod.

Tray sits beside me, leaving a gap between us—just like he did ten years ago. I recall the fear that gripped me back then. Strangers were a constant presence, but they were rarely kind. Tray, even at eleven, could have been any random stranger, much like those who bullied me at school. I was so thankful for that little space he left between us, even if his bright smile was anything but mean.

Now, I long to feel his warmth close by.

I glance at him, peeking out from under my hood. He looks straight ahead, mirroring my gaze.

“Why did you name that picture Mystic Tealglow?” he whispers. I smile, turning my gaze to where he looks.

“Imagine eyes that capture nature itself, a mix of forest green, peaceful ocean blue, and the glow of light… So intense and captivating. A gaze you can’t tear away from.” I smile, his eyes so clear in my head like they always have been. “They were a complete mystery, yet so calming and electrifying. It’s like the universe mixed its most beautiful colors into one stunning sight.”

Tray shifts slightly, and I look up at him. He’s staring at me, confusion creasing his brow.

“Eyes?” he asks softly.

“Yes, eyes. Your eyes,” I reply.

He blinks rapidly, then gazes at me with an awe that makes my heart skip. “You drew a picture and named it Mystic Tealglow because it reminded you of my eyes?”

I nod, smirking, and gesture toward the water, the trees, and the bright light reflecting from the lighthouse. “It’s always reminded me of your eyes. It’s my refuge. As much as I hated to admit it, your eyes were a blissful escape, Tray. They light up my life more than you know. That, and your smile.”

“I love you.” Trayton’s voice is raw, emotions spilling over. “So much, Dax, and I’m sorry it took me so long to realize that. My soul knew, but my mind and heart were just a bit behind.” He moves closer, and my entire body relaxes instantly. I hadn’t realized how tense I was, but the moment his warmth envelops me, everything is okay.

I’m safe. I’m free.

Trayton gently tugs up the sleeve on my arm, and I instinctively tense, pulling my right arm around to cover it again. “Don’t,” he murmurs softly. “I love every single inch of you, scars and all.” I manage a smile, though a wince escapes as his hand tenderly brushes over my healed but forever-marked skin. Both Tray and I bear these scars on our arms and backs from the fire, reminders of what we endured. We’ve had numerous skin grafts. Tray carries his scars with pride, as if they are a badge of honor, and rightfully so. In my eyes, he will always be my hero. I, however, am still fighting with mine, despite Trayton kissing them every night when I’m with him. They always bring back memories of two men I wish I could forget.

Though I can’t bring myself to mourn my dad’s passing, a twisted part of me feels a twinge of pity for him and the path he chose. He was once just a little brother trying to impress his older sibling. But look where that led him.

Trayton leans down, his lips trailing gentle kisses along my scars. “Mine,” he mumbles against my skin. “Mine always.” A single tear escapes. I’ve longed for the day Trayton would claim me as his. It feels surreal, like a dream I might awaken from at any moment.

Trayton lifts my hand, stopping me from rolling my sleeve back down. He loves seeing our scars together. The scars tell the story of a fire that couldn’t break us. They remind us every day that we faced the flames together and came out stronger, side by side.

Trayton grabs my finger, and I feel a jolt of surprise. “What-what are you doing?” I stammer, my heart racing. Trayton just gives a playful smirk that melts my confusion. He slides a black ring onto my finger, the one marked by the black smoke, and it takes my breath away. “It’s beautiful, Tray,” I say, mesmerized by its perfection, before finally tearing my gaze away to look at him.

“But what is it? What does it mean?” I ask, curiosity bubbling inside me. He smiles as if he’s been eagerly waiting for this moment.

“Whatever you want it to mean, Dax,” he replies, echoing the words I once said to him ten years ago. I laugh, feeling a rush of nostalgia, and stare back down at the ring.

“It’s perfect,” I whisper, reluctantly pulling my hand away even though it’s clear that Trayton doesn’t want to let go. I examine the ring closely, and Trayton urges me to take it off. When I do, he tells me to look inside.

“06.29.2012.”

“Happy ten-year tenth anniversary, Dax,” he utters tenderly, taking the ring from me and carefully sliding it back onto my finger. He lifts my hand to his lips, kissing it softly.

I raise my arm, revealing the fresh tattoo I got this morning. While Tray was out with the guys, I seized the chance to have it done. My drawing from the tattoo shop of the tree, the lake, and the light. It has Mystic Tealglow written above it and then a quote that I feel fits us perfectly. “Like the stars, we may fade from sight, but we always find our way back to each other.” Trayton’s eyes shimmer with emotion as he gazes at it, eventually meeting my eyes.

“Happy twenty-first Birthday, Tray,” I say, feeling full of every bit of love there is out there.

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Epilogue

Trayton

I hold Daxton's hand, feeling the pressure as he squeezes it so tightly that I fear it's going to break. Just ten minutes ago, I asked him to loosen his grip, and he did—for a few fleeting seconds. It's Dax's first time on a plane, and it's clear he won't be eager to repeat the experience. Beads of sweat roll down his forehead, showing just how nervous he is.

"It's nearly over," I murmur, gently tracing soothing circles on the back of his hand. He lifts his head, eyes wide with panic, and gives me a strained smile as I pull his hood down. His expression screams internal meltdown, and I hate that I can't do anything to help him. And he hasn't even faced the roughest part yet.

The landing.

"Just close your eyes; we'll be on the ground soon," I say, wrapping an arm awkwardly around his shoulders despite the armrest between us. He pulls his hood up again, resting his head on my chest, one hand clutching my shirt while the other remains locked around mine. I glance to my right at Kal, who remains fixed on the same spot he's been staring at since takeoff, his leg bouncing restlessly.

"Psst," I mutter to get his attention. His head jerks toward me, then down at Daxton's hooded head, and back up with a frown. "You're not scared of flying, so what's up with you?" I shift my gaze to his jittery leg. He places a hand on it, freezing the movement.

“I’m good,” he insists, nodding toward Dax.

“Never flown before. Not a fan.”

Kal’s lips twitch into a slight smile, and I shoot him a warning look, gritting my teeth. He raises his hands in mock surrender. I’m not letting anyone tease my man—except me.

“Never again,” Daxton mutters, looking as pale as a ghost. We linger outside the airport, waiting anxiously for Bohdi to pull up and take us to our hotel. Brayden is completely in the dark about us being here and the huge surprise party Bohdi’s planning at his brother’s place. It’s happening tomorrow night, and the rest of the team is flying in then because we couldn’t get enough seats on this flight.

At least tonight, I have Daxton all to myself in this new city. Kal has already announced his plan to just chill at the hotel. Now I remember where he met that girl. I understand why he’s sulking.

“Dax, it was only an hour and thirty minutes,” Kal says. I turn sharply to Kal, frowning and hugging Daxton even tighter.

“Yeah, a really long hour and thirty minutes, Kal,” I reply, shooting him a look that screams shut up. Kal just stares back, bored, then shifts his gaze between Dax and me, rolling his eyes.

Miserable jerk.

Right then, Bohdi honks his horn, and we all head for his car parked on the sidewalk. He jumps out, his smile as bright as ever. He slaps Kal on the back, then comes over to me and does the same, smirking, before turning his attention to Daxton. Dax beams back at him as Bohdi wraps him in a hug that ignites a flicker of jealousy within me. I quickly grab Bohdi’s arm, pulling it away from Daxton. “First, he’s mine. Back off.” Bohdi raises his eyebrows at me. “Second, why don’t I get a hug?” Kal bursts into laughter as he hops into the car, shutting the door.

“You don’t deserve a hug.”

I throw my hands up in bewilderment. “What have I done now?”

“When have you not done something?” Dax rolls his eyes next to me. I squint at him and then shift my gaze to Bohdi.

“You and that big trap of yours. Brayden’s been grilling me all morning because you let it spill that the whole ice hockey team was going on a weekend trip somewhere.” I look at him, utterly baffled.

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?”

“Oh, Jesus,” Daxton mutters beside me, and Bohdi squeezes the bridge of his nose, looking like he’s had enough of me. I still can’t figure out what the big deal is.

“Brayden’s part of the team, Trayton. He’d know if there was a trip planned. He knew something was off, and now I’ve had to text someone who can’t stand me, asking him to ignore Brayden’s message. Brayden texted Denny, wondering about this so-called trip he wasn’t invited to.”

Well, when he puts it like that… “I didn’t think of that, did I?”

“Clearly,” Bohdi and Daxton say together, their voices laced with frustration.

“Hey, you can’t be mad at me,” I say, pointing at Daxton. “This weekend’s for us too. I don’t want you upset with me. I’ve got too many plans involving my dick and your ass and your mouth.”

“Trayton,” Daxton hisses, his eyes wide.

“What?” I say, genuinely puzzled. His face turns crimson as he glances at Bohdi.

I laugh. “Oh, Bray’s told me some stories about him and Mr. Stiles here,” I smirk. “Or should I say Sir?” Bohdi shakes his head, trying to dismiss the comment.

“Just get in the car,” Bohdi says, walking away.

As he leaves, I lean down to Daxton and whisper, “School sauna, his old desk. You name it, they did it there.” Daxton tries to look serious but can’t hold back a grin when I wiggle my eyebrows. “I’ve been wanting to try the sauna and the gym pool, if you’re down?”

“God, I love you.” He beams, the warmth in his eyes unmistakable.

“Trayton,” Daxton whimpers, his legs trembling under my touch. I’ve got him face down, ass up, offering me that perfect ass as I indulge, my tongue savoring every moment. The sounds he makes while I lick him are enough to drive me wild. I pull back, slowly sliding my index finger in. This tightness feels like it was made just for me.

“Do you want more, baby?” I ask, going deeper. His legs shake with anticipation.

“Please, please.” He’s desperate and wanting, and I love it. I add a second finger, and his breaths come faster. “Tray, I need all of you inside me. Please fill me up,” he begs, repeating his pleas as I work my fingers in and out, curling them just right. “Jesus, Tray.” He gasps, overwhelmed. His cries are so intense that it feels like he’s on the edge of tears. I’m holding back, barely managing not to come just from his moans and the feel of him clenching around my digits. He’s absolutely perfect. I slowly pull my fingers away and lean back.

“Turn around.” When he does, I draw him close and capture his face with mine, pressing our lips together. It’s a messy, urgent kiss, full of passion. He wants me as much as I want him. “Lean over the table.” I breathe into his mouth, still kissing him as he nods, trying to move away, but I can’t let go. I tug on his lip ring with my teeth, and he moans, panting against my mouth. I guide him to the table across the room and gently push him down on it so his back is to me. He complies easily, stretching up on his tiptoes. I walk back to the bed, reaching over, grabbing the lube and both of our phones. I turn around, walking slowly toward him as he watches me with pure hunger. Fuck, I could drown in him when he looks like this. Begging and waiting patiently with his ass open for me. I place his phone next to him, and he watches me with wide eyes as I call him.

I video call him.

“Pick up, Dax,” I grunt, pouring lube on my hard length and then running a finger along it before slipping two fingers inside him.

“Tray,” he cries, and I revel in the sound of my name from his lips. It’s beautiful, a sound I want to hear again and again.

“Answer the phone,” I repeat, and Daxton scrambles, his hands shaking as he answers, his head dropping back onto the table with a soft thud as I prepare him. The camera focuses on my face, but I switch it around.

“Watch the phone, Daxton.” I breathe, showing the camera as I insert two fingers. His eyes remain fixed on the screen, moans escaping his lips. I

remove my fingers.

Dax doesn't take his eyes off the camera as he pleads, "More, Tray."

I smile, positioning myself at his entrance. From the camera, I see Daxton's eyes widen with desire. He looks predatory, and the sight alone makes me close my eyes in pleasure. I slowly enter him as he gasps sharply.

"Count," I hiss through clenched teeth.

Daxton breathes rapidly. "Count what?"

"Count every inch you take of me, baby."

"Fuck." He gasps again as I push in slightly.

"Daxton," I growl when he doesn't count.

"One." He breathes in. I push in again.

"Two." His voice cracks.

"Three." His breathing gets heavier.

"Four," he whines, one hand clawing the table above his head.

"Five. Tray, fuck me," he begs. I grip his hips tightly so he can't move as he tries to back up onto me.

"Be patient, baby."

I get a moan and then a grunt as I push in another inch. When he doesn't say anything, I pull out slightly.

"Six, six, six," he cries out.

"Se—" He stops as his eyes roll back, and I grit my teeth because all I want is to bury myself deep inside him. But I want him to see how perfectly he was made for me; how perfect he looks when I'm buried deep inside him.

"Seven," he finishes.

"Two more inches, baby, and you'll see how perfect we look together."

I push myself in one more inch, gripping his hips tightly as I struggle not to go all the way.

"Eight," he rushes out, eager for me to push myself to the hilt. I can't hold back either as I finish in one quick motion, and he screams, "Nine!"

"Nine whole inches of me inside you, baby. Look, look how tight you grip me." Daxton tenses, and I almost drop the phone from how intense it feels.

"I don't just want to fuck you, I want to love you, Dax." Remembering what I said when I told him I hated him, and I just wanted to fuck him.

He gasps. "Then fuck me and love me, Tray." He moans.

He stares at the camera, eyes wide as I pull back and push deep into him, gripping his hips and pulling him into me as I do.

“Jesusshitfuck.” I grit as I pull back, feeling like I’m going to come already. “You feel too good. I’m not going to last long.” I moan. I wanted this to last longer, but he always does this to me. He draws me in and leaves me wanting more.

I keep up my relentless thrusts, my hips slamming against him each time. I rise onto my toes, pushing myself as deeply as I can. I want to be inside him forever. Daxton’s hand moves frantically beneath him as he watches the video.

“Tray, oh god, I’m coming.” He moans, his body shuddering, panting breaths escaping his lips. That sends me over the edge. I pull out, spin him around, and pull him off the table to his knees on the floor.

“I don’t want to be dripping out of you at the party. I want you to be full of me. Now, drink me down,” I say, as Daxton’s lips wrap around me. I don’t need to move as I come, his tongue swirling around me, and my legs tremble so much that I grip the table and hold on to Daxton’s head. I lose track of the phone. When I think it’s over, though my body continues to quiver, I pull away and drop to the floor in front of him, pulling him close as we lie on the hotel floor, panting.

“That was the hottest thing ever,” Daxton declares.

“It was.” I pant. “And you ticked off the first ten things on my list.” I smile.

“What were they?”

“The first nine was you counting each inch of me filling you.” Daxton bursts out into laughter, his eyes screwing tightly shut as his mouth opens wide. “Number ten was me making you come.”

“Well done for getting the list done.” Dax pats my chest.

“No, I still have ten more.”

“Ten? What are the last ten?”

“To tell you ten things I love about you.” I smirk as I sit up slightly, holding Daxton’s scarred arm up.

“I love your scars.” I kiss his arm.

“I love your freckles.” I place a gentle kiss against his nose.

“I love your eyes.” I kiss his eyelid as he laughs.

“I love your tattoos.” I kiss the tattoo he got on his arm on my twenty-first birthday.”

“I love your neck.” I place a gentle kiss against his neck.

“I love your dick.” I lean down, placing a kiss on his dick.

“I love your ass,” I say, turning him around as he giggles, and I kiss his bare ass, before turning him back around.

“I love your lips.” I place a long lingering kiss on his lips.

“Most of all. I love your whole heart.” I place a kiss on his chest.

“I love you, Daxton.”

“He so knows.” Kal bursts out laughing in the dark as we sit in Bohdi’s brother’s house, the anticipation thick, while Cash waits for Bohdi to show up with Brayden. There’s something in the family genes—Daxton’s eyes widened the moment Cash stepped through the door, and I nudged him hard. The nerve he has to look at someone like that. But then he grinned, and I got an elbow in reply when my jaw literally dropped. Jesus Christ, these guys look like they just stepped off a fashion runway ad.

They can’t hold a candle to my Dax though.

“Shut up, I’m already on Bohdi’s shit list,” I hiss, sparking a few snickers from behind. Just then, the key turns in the door, and it swings open. We all freeze for a heartbeat, my excitement ready to burst. I know today’s been rough on him. Celebrating your twenty-first birthday without your twin is a pain that’s hard to imagine. I texted him earlier, and although he tried video calling me and Kal twice, we both dodged the calls, feeling like absolute crap.

The moment the light comes on, we all leap up, yelling, “Surprise!” The shock on his face melts into a staggering smile, the one that lights up our world as his eyes well up with tears. Kal and I rush forward, scooping him up and taking turns wrapping him in tight hugs. Amid it all, I lean close to his ear and mutter, “I’m not fucking crying in front of these male models. Don’t make me cry, Brayden Quake Anders.”

He laughs into my ear, squeezing me a little harder. “Thank you so much for coming. I love you, Tray.” I step back as Daxton slips in beside us. “Why is Kal wearing a cap? He never wears a cap,” Bray whispers.

“I have no idea; he told me he wanted to wear it. He’s been acting weird since we got here, and Bohdi’s brother, Cash, keeps looking at Kal weirdly. Bray frowns at me, his eyes scanning the room, no doubt looking for Kal. Daxton pushes an envelope toward him.

“Happy Birthday, Bray,” Dax says with a warm smile, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. He’d already let the tears flow in my arms earlier, talking about Bex and all the plans they once dreamed up.

Brayden’s lip trembles as Daxton hands him an envelope. We wanted to give him something with true meaning behind it.

He opens it slowly, unfolding the certificate. “Bex was a shining star in a lot of our lives,” the certificate reads, and Dax’s voice trembles as he explains, “Tray and I went to the lighthouse and found the perfect star in the sky. It’s the biggest one.” His voice cracks while I bite my lip to keep my emotions in check. Brayden’s eyes stay fixed on the certificate, silent except for the endless tears streaming down his face.

“And we picked out another star, right next to it,” I say, handing over another envelope. Brayden struggles to hold back tears as he opens it and reads the contents.

“Guys, it’s perfect. Thank you so much,” he says, choking up as he pulls us both into a tight hug. He grips the second certificate, smiling through his tears.

“What’s the second star called, Bray?” Bohdi asks gently beside him.

He looks at me and Dax, beaming. “BB for life.”

A few hours later, everyone is happily drunk—no more tears, just joy. Karaoke is blasting, and I realize everyone in the Stiles family is unbelievably hot. It’s very weird. Cash Stiles’s wife is stunning and has a personality to match. Though I’m pretty sure she’s here to steal my man. She’s been talking to Daxton for the last hour. I swagger over, tipsy from my fifth beer, and drape my arm around Daxton’s shoulder.

“Uh, Rylee, can I have my man back, please?”

“Tray, it’s been an hour, you caveman,” she says, rolling her eyes with a smirk.

“And I’ve got ten years to make up for,” I say, grinning at him. “I want to make every moment count.” I wasn’t planning to tell him until we got back, but my drunk self can’t hold it in any longer. I dig into my pocket, pull out a set of keys, and place them in his hand.

“What’s this?”

“Our apartment keys.” Daxton’s eyes dart from the keys to me and back.

“What?” His voice cracks.

After our last game, two NHL teams approached me. I told Daxton. It was Ice Rapids, in Detroit, just an hour and a half from Hawksview, or Blizzards in Winnipeg, Canada. Who also approached Kal as well as Washington Shards. And Brayden had a few teams approach him. None of them being near Hawksview, but Washington Shards, which is near here. Near Bohdi’s family. Cope got approached by Ice Rapids, too, and he told me the other day he signed the contract. Dax has anxiously been waiting to hear what teams we are going to. Kal and Bray haven’t decided what they are going to do, and I know wherever they are in this world, they will always be my brothers, and they will never leave me. I truly know that now. But I already made my decision. It was an easy choice.

“I signed the contract with Ice Rapids.”

“But Blizzards? That was your dream team,” he says, staring at me with shock, disbelief, and maybe sadness. I look down at him, frowning.

“It was once upon a time. Then you came back for me,” I say with a smile. “Everyone left, but no one ever came back. You did.” I breathe, kissing him.

“Shit,” he chokes out as Rylee sniffles beside us.

“Sorry, this is sweet, but I need to hug you both.” She pulls us in, whispering to Daxton, “Life’s too short. Don’t ever let him go.”

Rylee steps back, tears in her eyes, and walks away. I look at Daxton. “Say yes.”

“You’re doing this for me?” he asks, looking at the keys in his palm.

“I’m doing this for us. For the life we owe each other. You’re my dream now. Our future is my dream. There’s no dream without you.” Tears fall, and he closes his hand around the key.

“Fuck yes.” He breathes the words.

“Fuck yes.” I grin, and Daxton laughs as we kiss.

“I love you, Daxton Rivers.”

“I love you, Trayton King. Always have.”

“The parrrtaaayyy is here!” a girl yells from the doorway. I turn, still grinning because Daxton said yes.

“Toni!” Rylee screams, running to the door and jumping on the blonde. A tall, blond guy follows, holding a little girl no older than two.

“Why does she look so familiar?” I whisper, my mind scrambling as fleeting images spike behind closed eyes until—snap! Recognition strikes. “It can’t be.” My gaze darts around the room until it fixes on Kal, motionless in the crowd. His pale face locked on her. A surge of panic has me sprinting toward him.

“Bro.”

“It’s her,” he murmurs, voice low, resolute; his eyes are glued to her as she greets everyone with a beaming smile.

“What’s happening?” Daxton interjects, arriving with a beer that I immediately shove into Kal’s hand—it feels like his lifeline right now.

Words falter on my tongue. “I don’t even know where to begin. I’ll explain later,” I manage to say, entranced by the scene unfolding. As we stand rooted to the spot, Kal steps forward. “Bro.” I try seizing his arm, shaking my head in silent alarm. He hesitates—a brief, pregnant pause—then continues, halting as her gaze finds him.

In that moment, her entire demeanor shifts as if a chill wind snuffed out the spark in her eyes, replacing her radiant smile with sheer, haunted disbelief. Her mouth parting, she utters, breath catching, “Ka—Kaleb.”

A collective quiet crashes down on us; even Rylee’s gasp booms like a warning. “Oh my god, I knew I recognized him,” Rylee says, holding her hand to her mouth.

I haven’t heard anyone call him Kaleb in years. It’s always Kal.

“Kaleb?” Bohdi questions from behind Toni, confusion marring his face.

“I knew I recognized him, I just couldn’t pinpoint where from,” Bohdi’s brother Cash says, standing next to Bohdi. Then he leans in, whispering into Bohdi’s ear which makes Bohdi’s face pale a considerable amount.

What the fuck is going on?

I turn my focus to Kal. His eyes flit between Toni, Rylee, Cash, and Bohdi, each face now mirroring the shock of witnessing a ghost. Bohdi’s voice comes in an awed whisper. “It all makes sense…” as if Kal has morphed into someone unrecognizable. “Bu-but…” Bohdi falters, his usual smooth tone shattered. The revelation sits heavy: This runs deeper than Kal has ever let on.

“The auction.” Bodhi snaps his fingers like he’s trying to remember something. “Hawks. I remember seeing the papers the day after. Kaleb Hawks.”

“Auction?” I hiss, leaning in, full of suspicion. “What the fuck have you gotten yourself into?”

“Hawks,” Bohdi scoffs, as he runs his fingers through his hair as it all clicks into place in his head. And here I stand, reeling at the face of a girl—a girl Kal has been relentlessly chasing, fucking pining, for nearly three agonizing years. And she’s now strangely linked to Bohdi. Kal has been making moves and hasn’t even told me or Bray. Wait until I get him on his own.

“Toni,” Kal calls out, his eyes fixed on her, softening as he swallows hard, a bittersweet grin flickering across his features. “Long time.”

Before Toni can answer, a small commotion shatters the heavy air—the little girl bursts through like a sudden heartbeat, dark hair in playful pigtails, her tiny fingers clutching Toni’s leg desperately. Time seems to slow. Toni looks down at the child, then uncertainly shifts her gaze to Kal. Rylee’s hand flies to her mouth in another gasp as her eyes begin to glisten. I watch, transfixed, at the little girl, Toni, and the man with the blond hair. It strikes me that the little girl’s hair is a dark, rich brown. Nothing like the mom’s or the blond guy standing behind them. But much like the guy standing next to me.

I edge up beside Kal. “How long ago were you with her?” His intake of breath is jagged, his eyes locked on Toni, who lifts the little girl, cradling her against her chest as tears streak down Toni’s face. Kal’s face pales further; it’s almost ghostly. My glance flits to Bohdi and Brayden—Bohdi whispering as Brayden’s hand rises to his mouth in a silent, shocked acknowledgment.

I point to the little girl, voice a trembling whisper. “Kal…” No one says it aloud; it lingers, unspoken, but heavy in the air. Then, as I turn to meet his searching eyes, I repeat with a mix of dread and resolve, “Kal…” Slowly, he swivels to face me. “Is she yours?”

The end.

If you want to get a little teaser of Kal's book… Keep scrolling ;)

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Afterword

If you ever find yourself in a situation where you need help, please do not hesitate to reach out to your national help hotline. There is always someone there to help and listen.
You're not alone.

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Prologue

Kal – Seventeen years old

"Champagne, sir?" the waitress asks, and I give a quick nod and a tight-lipped smile, grabbing the tall flute from her tray. The room is buzzing with energy, decked out in extravagant decorations, and everyone looks like they've been counting down to this night all year. At seventeen, I should be out with friends, sneaking into parties and downing drinks I'm not supposed to touch. I should be on the ice, pushing myself for that AHL contract. Not stuck at a charity ball. But here I am, keeping my dad satisfied. He wants me here, molding me to fill his shoes someday. So I plaster on a grin, nod along to conversations that fly over my head, and I usually drink until the night doesn't seem so bad. My dad always gets swept away into side rooms, discussing big donations or hashing out business deals, leaving me to fend for myself. That's where the champagne comes in handy—being six-foot-five and two hundred and twenty pounds at this age means no one questions whether I can legally drink or not.

We don't usually fly out for these things, but the ice hockey coach at Hawksview, where my dad is on the board, has a friend whose brother owns some marketing company. Apparently, there's something about this charity ball that makes it special. Plus, my grandma lives here in Baltimore, so it's a solid excuse to spend a week with her. Mom would typically be here, too, but she stayed back because Grandma's not doing well. I scan the crowd, watching people drink and laugh. Meanwhile, I'm trapped in a five-

thousand-dollar tux that feels like a straitjacket. God, when will this night end?

They've been running auctions, and my dad's put our Whitefish cabin up for grabs. Some brooding guy just snagged it. He probably doesn't even know it's ours since Dad kept his name out of it. He always goes down as unknown when donating. Another waitress glides by with trays of champagne, and I snatch one, swapping it for my empty glass. "Wait until you hear who we have up for bidding next, ladies and gentlemen," the woman on stage announces with a sly grin, cranking up the intrigue. I've been to countless charity balls, watching properties, trips, and vacations go under the hammer, but never people.

"Bohdi Stiles," she calls out, and the room erupts into shrieks, one of them painfully close to my ear. Bohdi Stiles rings a bell—I think he's someone my dad has mentioned.

"Toni Delray," she continues, and suddenly it's like all the oxygen is sucked out of the place.

Fuck, she's stunning. The most captivating girl I've laid eyes on in my seventeen years. Her hips sway as she strides onto the stage, and cheers and whistles echo around. I can't look away. Her blonde, wavy hair tumbles down her back, shimmering under the lights. Her gown clings to her like a second skin, flaunting her curves without a hint of modesty. The neckline plunges daringly, teasing just enough. She's all fucking woman. Her eyes sparkle as they scan the crowd, her bright smile unwavering. Confidence radiates from her, and I'm drawn to it like never before. High cheekbones sculpt her heart-shaped face, and loose curls frame her features like a masterpiece. She's a beacon up there; everything else fades into the background as I fixate on her.

Toni Delray.

Damn. The roar of shouting snaps me out of my trance, but nothing can pull my eyes away from her. Amid the frenzy of voices and movement, all I see is her, high above on the stage.

"Now, Toni Delray is up next," the lady declares.

Toni's smile? It explodes into something even brighter than before. As bids fly, Toni exudes pleasure, as men toss another stack of a thousand dollars into the mix.

"I'm thirty soon—a Bali getaway would be the best early birthday treat," she teases with a mischievous wink.

I’m burning with need for her. She’s twelve years older than me, but that fact barely registers. The hunger I feel is raw and intense, a craving as fierce as anything I’ve ever known. When some loudmouth, overweight, receding-hairline dick shouts a ten-thousand-dollar bid, a surge of anger ignites inside me—I want to crush them all.

Without a thought, I roar, “Fifteen thousand.”

The room drops to a heavy silence as Toni locks her gaze on mine. Her eyes strip me bare, scrutinizing every inch of me—my face, my hair, my body—without a hint of a smile. Her silent appraisal sends shivers down my spine. "Congratulations to the lucky winner…" the lady drags out, clearly fishing for my name.

My mind races; I blurt out, “Kaleb Hawks.” Kaleb is my real name, even if everyone calls me Kal. Hawks is the college I’m starting next semester.Toni’s eyes light up, and her smile softens into something inviting. I lick my bottom lip, drawn magnetically to her full, kissable mouth. The thought of tasting her is like a fucking adrenaline shot. It’s as if she can sense my desire for her—her eyes sparkle, and her smile deepens as they dart from my gaze to my lips.

"Well, Kaleb, I can tell you that fifteen thousand dollars is worth every penny for the stunning Toni. You’ve got a lot to live up to on that date. Have fun." The announcer chuckles. “Have fun.”

Fun? I grin, flashing her a look that promises more than just one night, as I down the last of my champagne without ever breaking eye contact.

I’m not about to have a fleeting date with her. I plan to claim her over and over, starting tonight.

I will carve and bite my memory into every inch of her lightly tanned skin.

Toni Delray is mine.

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Afterword 2

Thank you for reading *Shattered Hate*. I hope you enjoyed the sweet, yet emotional rollercoaster that these characters took us on. If you want to talk about any of the characters or the storyline, my DMs are ALWAYS open!

For updates on the Hawksview boys, please follow my Instagram (PS. Black) or join my reader group where you will get access to exclusive content.

Kal's book will be the third and last book in the Hawksview U Series and I'm so excited for you to read Kal's and Toni's book. For those of you that read my Lost & Found Duet, Is Kaleb Hawks ringing any bells right now? ;)

Kal's Book (Title TBC) doesn't have a release date yet, but the Amazon date is just a hold date for now. Pre-order here >>> Kal's Book (Title TBC)

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Also by PS. Black

Lost & Found Duet

Always. Forever. (Book 1)

Make Me Feel Again (Book 2)

This duet is the story of Jace, Cash and Rylee.

Hawksview U Series

Shattered Ice (Book 1)

Shattered Hate (Book 2)

Kal's Book – Title TBC (Book 3)

Standalones

His Taste of Christmas

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